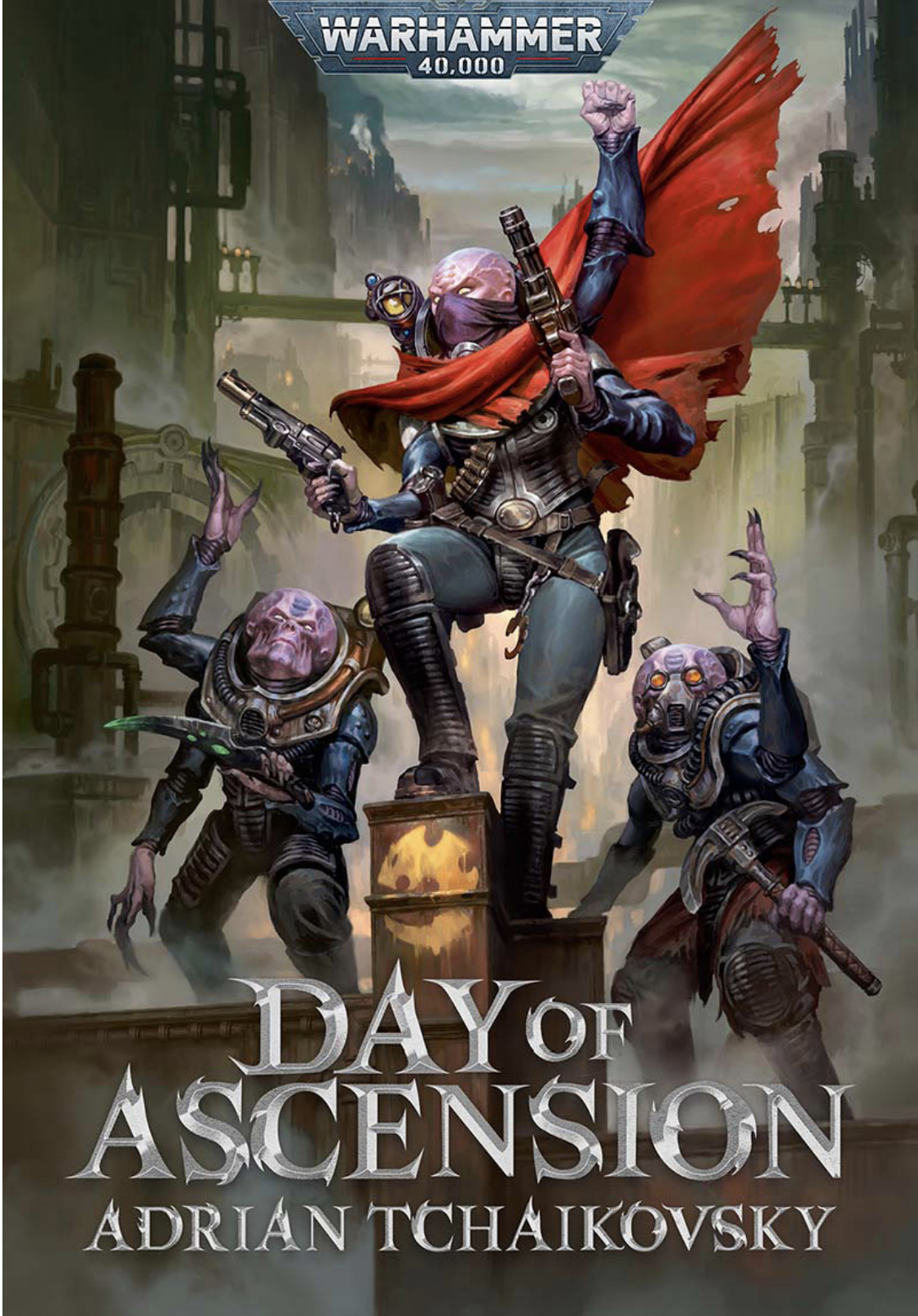


WARHAMMER
40,000

**DAY OF
ASCENSION**
ADRIAN TCHAIKOVSKY

WARHAMMER
40,000



OceanofPDF.com

BACKLIST

By the same author

‘RAISED IN DARKNESS’
A Genestealer Cults short story
Featured in [INFERNO! VOLUME 6](#)

Other great Warhammer 40,000 reads

• DAWN OF FIRE •

[Book 1: AVENGING SON](#)

Guy Haley

[Book 2: THE GATE OF BONES](#)

Andy Clark

[Book 3: THE WOLFTIME](#)

Gav Thorpe

[CULT OF THE SPIRAL DAWN](#)

Peter Fehervari

[IMPERATOR: WRATH OF THE OMNISSIAH](#)

Gav Thorpe

• THE TWICE-DEAD KING •

Nate Crowley

[Book 1: RUIN](#)

[Book 2: REIGN](#)

• DARK IMPERIUM •

Guy Haley

[Book 1: DARK IMPERIUM](#)

[Book 2: PLAGUE WAR](#)

[Book 3: GODBLIGHT](#)

BELISARIUS CAWL: THE GREAT WORK

Guy Haley

• **WATCHERS OF THE THRONE** •

Chris Wraight

Book 1: THE EMPEROR'S LEGION

Book 2: THE REGENT'S SHADOW

rites of passage

Mike Brooks

OceanofPDF.com

BLACK LIBRARY

To see the full Black Library range visit
blacklibrary.com and games-workshop.com



MP3 AUDIOBOOKS | BOOKS | EBOOKS

CONTENTS

Cover

Backlist

Title Page

Warhammer 40,000

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

About the Author

An Extract from 'Dawn of Fire: Avenging Son'

A Black Library Publication

eBook license

OceanofPDF.com



DAY OF ASCENSION

ADRIAN TCHAIKOVSKY



OceanofPDF.com



For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the Master of Mankind. By the might of His inexhaustible armies a million worlds stand against the dark.

Yet, He is a rotting carcass, the Carrion Lord of the Imperium held in life by marvels from the Dark Age of Technology and the thousand souls sacrificed each day so that His may continue to burn.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. It is to suffer an eternity of carnage and slaughter. It is to have cries of anguish and sorrow drowned by the thirsting laughter of dark gods.

This is a dark and terrible era where you will find little comfort or hope. Forget the power of technology and science. Forget the promise of progress and advancement. Forget any notion of common humanity or compassion.

There is no peace amongst the stars, for in the grim darkness of the far future, there is only war.

OceanofPDF.com

1

The body of Fabricator General Burzulem, lord of Morod, was like a great bronze bell clad in red and gold. His bald head, set in a writhing nest of segmented cables without any obvious neck, projected from the shadow of its upper slopes, most often pitched downwards so as to properly condescend towards his kneeling inferiors. When he walked, it was with a swaying gait, as though there should be the toll of a clapper with each step. It was a disquietingly fluid movement from a man who had long ago done away with human feet. The dozen articulated limbs that carried him along should skitter, Gammat Triskellian strongly felt, rather than let such a great weight of metal drift and eddy like a denizen of sunless alien sea-floors.

Right now, the Fabricator General was at rest, which for him did not mean sitting, the metal shell of his body lacking any manner of waist. Instead, Burzulem crouched on a dais, canted to observe the supplicants below with a regard benign or otherwise as the mood took him. At one shoulder – or at least the juncture where cyborg arms projected from his body – was Fabricator Locum Alloysia, his constant sycophant. She was a stiletto of a woman, all sharp edges and a coiling of servitor tentacles holding writs and scrolls and an ancient reckoning engine. Each tech-priest to come forward would have his requests weighed and measured on the cogs of that relic and given a moiety of Burzulem's bounty for the coming year.

And there had been some bare years for Triskellian and his fellows in the Genetor order. Their work seldom attracted Burzulem's approbation. *Error and bias*, he thought, awaiting his turn, but what could he do, outside these protocols and procedures? Triskellian had submitted his order's requests for the coming calendrical research term, a long screed of closely written

proposals for expeditions, experiments and devotional exercises seeking that ultimate perfection where flesh and machine could more elegantly express the intent of the Omnissiah. *So much that we are on the very brink of.* Except Burzulem had his favourites, and Triskellian's people were not among them.

The current petitioner was long-winded. Alloysia shifted on the sharp points of her metal feet. Behind her, the bulk of her Kastelan robot mimicked the movement ponderously.

'Entirely, absolutely and in all other ways contraindicated,' Burzulem cut the man off. 'Egregiously tedious, Matriculus. Don't you think, Alloy?'

'Monotonous to the point of sedation, Fabricator General.' Alloysia made a great show of yawning, something her engineered respiratory system had no need for.

'Nothing for you, Matriculus. Join the conscription pool. Go round us up some fitting offerings.' A hollow chuckle rang through Burzulem's frame. 'Now, who do we have here? Pronotum Tan? Forwards, Master Tan, and let us have your insights.'

Tan, a crony of Burzulem of old, had a dozen of Morod's manufactoria in his care. He wished, he said, to revisit a metallurgical technique long fallen into disuse but recently unearthed by his researchers. Nothing *significant*, Triskellian noted with disdain. Just one more paring of knowledge fallen on the foundry floor a century before, and now swept out from under the tables by a plodder like Tan. And it was mercury, of course. Tan was obsessed with mercurial alloys, no matter the toll they took on flesh. He was reeling off his estimates now: two per cent greater durability, four per cent increase in production speed. And, buried in the figures, eleven per cent reduction in the estimated lifespan of the manufactorum workers, from contact with all that toxic metal. And that would impact productivity in a generation's time, Triskellian knew, and doubtless that was why the practice had been abandoned the first time. *We go round and round, abandoning bad ideas only for someone to come along and 'discover' them all over again...*

But Tan received a generous allocation of the research bursary for his bad idea, and then it was the turn of Triskellian to step forwards – almost the very end of the long line – to shepherd in his own proposals. He stood as tall as he could, irising his artificial eyes to steely blue dots, manually releasing a little pressure from the bellows in his chest to give his voice a

steadier tone.

‘Oh,’ Burzulem said, rolling his one organic eye. ‘Observe, Alloy, it’s our esteemed colleague the Visceral Triskellian.’ A nickname that had dogged Triskellian since their common youth in the seminary.

‘Fabricator General—’ But then he was waved to silence as a servitor bustled jerkily in with news. Burzulem took the scroll from the man-shaped thing and held it back and forth, his living eye squinting and its brass counterpart telescoping in and out.

‘Aha!’ An expression of glee that set the man’s body ringing with resonant echoes. ‘Our steel prodigies have returned, splendid. My learned colleagues’ – his voice abruptly turned up to twice the volume to encompass the whole room – ‘I am informed that we have today in orbit some proud sons and daughters of Morod. Our faithful conscripts, who left our shores in times past to be remade from gross flesh into gallant skitarii. They who left our world to nobly quest under the light of other stars have returned to welcome those whom we send to join their cybernetic siblinghood. And we must not shame them, my learned colleagues. We must ensure that they are welcomed with fireworks and ceremony and all the precisely calculated degrees of appropriately calibrated jubilation. And fresh conscripts, of course. Lots and *lots* of conscripts. Forgive me, colleagues, this places such a burden of administration on my head.’ And the bell-frame of his body was lifted up onto its many little feet, ready to drift away as though blown by the wind.

Triskellian adjusted his bellows again until a sound like a cough issued from his chest. Burzulem stopped, one eye and then the other swivelling down.

‘Oh,’ he said, without relish. ‘Oh yes, mustn’t go before listening to old Visceral. Uncase your contents and reveal all, Visceral.’

Triskellian ground his teeth but held on to both patience and dignity. ‘Fabricator General,’ he said, passing his scrolls to a servitor to be ferried to Burzulem’s bronze grasp. ‘The genetors put forward a wide-ranging and pan-disciplinary research curriculum primarily focused on my own work with the skitarii. As you know, current practice on remote reconfiguration of our skitarii in the field relies heavily on adaptation only of their mechanical components, often to the detriment of their remaining living systems, impairing function and reducing operational lifespan. I am

experimenting with a philtre that would grant greater resilience and adaptability to organic tissue, thus allowing us the same degree of control and manipulation of their living substance and therefore—’

‘Ugh,’ Burzulem interrupted. ‘Same old Visceral. I know your type likes to dabble in all manner of unspeakable substances but this can only be characterised as unseemly. Insalubrious. Do you concur, Alloy?’

‘Positively infested with organic effluvia,’ Alloysia agreed. She had the great weight of proposals held up now, her tendrils leafing through them in a blur. ‘And unprecedented, Fabricator General. I don’t see a single seal or writ of dispensation certifying this research. Where were these techniques originally set out, Visceral?’

‘I am following a revised line of enquiry,’ Triskellian said carefully. ‘You’ll see that I have conducted an analysis on the gaps in recovered research, and I am attempting to reconstruct the original through... novel procedures that follow a statistical best-fit model.’ He had been shuffling forwards as she read, and now he was right at the foot of the dais, looking up at them. Hating himself for having to beg, but this once he needed to impress his loathsome pair of superiors. *I could reach out and...*

‘Follow, do they?’ Burzulem echoed. ‘But Triskellian, it seems to me that you haven’t been *following* at all. This all sounds as though you have just been *making it all up* like any layman might, in his folly.’ Abruptly his face was all hard and stern, levity banished. ‘If this work is the righteous labour of a tech-priest, show me where it has been perfected and performed by our predecessors. Show me in the histories, O wayward genetor, where these things have been judged fit for our rites and doctrine. Because this looks to me as though you feel you can trample over how things are *done* in your haste to get to places our forebears never went. And if they never *went*, Visceral, it was for good reason. You will *follow* these novel enquiries of yours all the way to heresy. If it were meant for us to do these things, then these things would have been done.’ And most of the other tech-priests there echoed the litany in a droning mumble.

I could just... ‘Where the ancient routines are incomplete, then only experimentation can determine what the original processes might have been,’ Triskellian equivocated hurriedly. ‘I swear before the writ of the Omnissiah that I shall—’

‘No,’ Burzulem stated. ‘We will keep you from temptation, my wayward

genetor, for you are ours to protect from your own worst impulses.’ A metallic snicker. ‘No resources allocation for Gammat Triskellian and his genetors, Alloy. Note that down.’

‘Duly noted, Fabricator General.’

‘Instead, the conscription pool. After all, we mustn’t shame our returning heroes, now that the vagaries of the warp have brought them back to us for our festivities. We shall have an Ascension Day fit to remember! The greatest for a century! But don’t think I have forgotten you, dear Visceral. The conscription pool yawns for you, Triskellian. In fact, because I love and value you, you shall have the responsibility of meeting quota. Let your novel enquiries be put into the best manner of rounding up a new batch of prospective servitors and skitarii. Harvest us a good crop, Visceral, and maybe next year you might have a little bursary of your own.’

‘Fabricator General, please!’ And before he could stop himself, Triskellian leant forwards, actually laid a hand on the taut fabric of Burzulem’s robe. Even went so far as to tug at the man, pulling him forwards, teetering at the dais’ edge. *And I could. I could cast him down.* The thought was simultaneously sacrilegious and electrifying. *What biased calculations placed him over me? Shift one decimal and it would be me there denying him!*

‘How dare!’ Burzulem shrieked. ‘Alloysia, have him unhand me!’

The gunfire began even with his last words, a figure bursting through the assembled tech-priests, scattering them like pins. Triskellian saw two hands brandishing pistols. Two, and then a third. There were skitarii shouldering in after, virtually clubbing the junior priests down in their haste to get to the assassin. The first shots had torn great gouges in Burzulem’s finery, leaving bright scars on the metal shell of his body. The next—

Triskellian pulled. He still had a fistful of the torn robe and he hauled on it with all his strength, dragging the Fabricator General off his pedestal with a wail. Burzulem hit the ground with a sonorous bronze peal, his many feet kicking and rattling for purchase. The guns blazed.

Triskellian’s world went white. He felt a moment of incandescent agony about his arm and shoulder, and then the limits he had set within his flesh killed the pain before it could overwhelm him. His internal chronologue informed him that he had lost one and a half seconds of experienced time as his nervous system overloaded and was brought forcibly back. He was

draped over the rocking, protesting form of Burzulem. Or most of him was. There was an arm lying in rags and tatters, spattered up the steps of the dais. Triskellian's left arm. The salvo of pistol fire had blown it clean off his shoulder.

Up on the dais, Alloysia was stock-still, frozen as though her limbs had glitched. Her Kastelan robot mimicked her startled posture, no help at all.

The assassin was standing over him. Triskellian's eyes – the two blue-lensed replacements he'd had installed after one explosive lab failure too many – kept shifting focus between the three barrels. Three hands. In the seconds before his surely impending death he focused on ridiculous details: the toughened horny skin of those fingers, like chitin or machinery, perfect in its articulation. He looked past the guns to the killer's face, seeing a woman's features stretched, the eyes sheer black, the mouth wide.

The skitarii opened fire then, the blue-green light of their carbines crackling about the room. At least one junior tech-priest was caught where he shouldn't have been and cut down in error – *must recalibrate their targeting; what thoughts to have, in the last moments of one's life!* – but then the assassin staggered as they found her. Even then she turned and shot down two of them, bullets seeking out vital battery connections and fluid pumps. Another iridescent scatter of shot raked across her and she went down to one knee, pistols jumping from spasming hands.

Burzulem bucked and jolted his rider off him. Triskellian landed hard, a searing sensation shooting through his body – not pain but the recollection of it – which had been locked away in those one point five seconds of blanked memory. The assassin was snarling, hissing, pinned down by the metal hands of five skitarii as another levelled a rifle at her misshapen head.

'Hold.' Burzulem actually sounded composed as Alloysia helped him to his feet. 'Such an unpardonable insult as this deserves more public proceedings.' He didn't even sound out of breath, but then of course whatever was breathing for the Fabricator General was independent of whatever spoke for him. 'Ascension Day is upon us, after all, and along with a crop of offerings we will need entertainment. Electric excruciation, I think, for the greater glory of the Omnissiah. And in this case we will need to build the frame especially. The mines will keep turning out their mutations, will they not?' He poked at the wounds of the assassin, as she hung in the skitarii's grip. 'Remarkable. She has too many arms and you,

Visceral, now have too few.’ He looked down at Triskellian, who was exploring the ruin of his shoulder to see what could be saved. ‘Doubtless, left to your own experiments, you would amputate one of hers and merely add it to the frailties of your own flesh. I shall save you from the baseness of your proclivities. Go, have yourself fitted with an appropriately metallurgical replacement. And then to your duties! After all, we have a momentous day planned. Go and prove you’re worthy of a little responsibility.’

Without a backward glance, Burzulem drifted from the room, his many little feet tapping lightly on the floor. The other priests followed after him, bowing and scraping and commending his wisdom.

One of the skitarii helped Triskellian to his feet. He made an abortive movement towards the wreck of his lost arm, feeling light-headed at the loss of blood, or at least fluids. Shock was setting in, he knew. He needed to get back to his lab, where a cocktail of biological suppressants would have him thinking clearly again.

‘Wait.’ The word was out of his mouth before he knew why he’d said it. The skitarii had been hauling the assassin off – rendered unconscious by her own shock and blood loss, he saw.

‘Tech-priest?’

‘Make sure she lives,’ he got out. ‘So she can be executed in public.’ Servitors had arrived to clean up the mess, and again he wanted to reclaim his arm, one more piece of the dwindling biological material he’d been born with. Sentiment, though, and that had no place in a man of his station. He was staring at the killer’s sagging features, her weirdly proportioned head. It reminded him of something he’d read about, long ago. The obscure researches of priests who’d come before him. A mutant, Burzulem had said. Triskellian wasn’t so sure.

But by then he really did have to get to his lab before the shock overcame his implants and took him down. And then there was the conscription pool, mean and menial work as it was. He stumbled off, waving away any attempt at help. He needed to think about his future.

OceanofPDF.com

2

The forge world of Morod was a place of hierarchies. The Adeptus Mechanicus liked their dominions that way, every wheel of society gradated with a thousand carefully measured teeth, every individual set into a precisely shaped socket. Not that the socket was cut out to fit them, of course. You got moulded to the sockets that had been there since time immemorial, and if you didn't fit, then out came the hammer.

And, as it was above for the tech-priests themselves, so it was below. There were many tasks that were too menial for the actual clergy themselves; too pedestrian for their cybernetic skitarii soldiers, yet too demanding for the bluntly direct minds of their robots. Under Fabricator General Burzulem this went double. He was, he proudly declaimed, a cerebral man. He needed meaner creatures to attend to his every need, to scrub the floors of the Palatium Lucidium until they gleamed, to prepare the fine delicacies his artificial tongue could surely not appreciate, to bow and scrape and reassure him of his pre-eminence. Davien knew all of this. It was why they let her into the Palatium. She was young, her biological eyes still keen, her hands still steady. She had none of the shakes, the squints, the defects that latched on to most of Morod's populace before they cleared a quarter century. She ran messages between the lowest tiers of overseers, the most trivial of the tech-priests' direct servants. She served as courier for the passive aggression of a thousand interdepartmental feuds. On rarer occasions she was called out to use her keen eyes and hands to touch up paint on walls, paint on robots, paint on the sacred symbols of Adeptus Mechanicus and Imperial power. Burzulem insisted that every corridor and hall his august form swayed through was immaculate, so that the perfection

without could inculcate a similar precision within. The scuff of her sandals could be heard in almost any part of Lucidium save for the cells and the senior priests' private chambers, where loftier and more augmented servants held sway. Davien's place, therefore, was at the very base of the hierarchy, so low as to be beneath the notice of the priesthood themselves. She was supposed to be grateful that she had even that meagre place in the world.

But the priests' hierarchy was not the only one. As above, so below. And Davien was a creature of many parts. She came from manufactorum and mining people, the workers who thronged the tunnels and camps of Morod and whom the tech-priests crammed into the city of Auctorites to be used up and cast away in their factories and their experiments. Her home was beneath the poorest, most congested tenements of the South Chasm district, where succeeding generations had carved out warrens of tunnels and cell-like rooms to escape the overcrowding above, until the very earth was a honeycomb of lightless dwellings. The poorest of the poor lived there, shoulder to shoulder, leaving only to risk limbs and health amidst the machines of the manufactoria. A hundred thousand people dwelled in the dark beneath the South Chasm tenements, and amongst them were Davien's clan, hiding their deformities and especial blessings behind the mutations and the cancers and the industrial injuries of the rest.

Everything on Morod was toxic; the only variable was whether it killed you tomorrow or over the course of forty years. Unless you were a tech-priest with half your organs replaced by machines, you weren't ever going to get old. The work crews were constantly trying to scavenge or cobble together protective gear to steal just a few more years of life and service from the jaws of the void. The priests didn't like that, though. They said it slowed the work, compromised efficiency. And the Omnissiah loved efficiency above all things. Davien had seen the murals, soot-stained and grimy on the walls of every manufactorum: the chain of workers hand in hand like an industrial process until they tumbled into the great furnace, maker and made melting together in the flames, and all still *smiling*.

And so, even as she played out her role as the least cog in the Mechanicus machine, she stole secrets and knowledge to bring to her people – warnings of raids, locations of caches. But that wasn't the end of her hierarchies. The poor clave she lived in, the warren beneath the ruinous leaning tenements,

was the heart of something that the tech-priests had never even guessed at.

Even now she was heading there, darting out of the Palatium by one of the old side locks most of the priests didn't realise was still working. She'd had to shuffle her feet too long, to hear the news she'd been waiting for. The news her extended family was desperate for. And the news was bad.

Sakiri had failed. She had tried to kill the Fabricator General and been stopped, been *caught*, even. She, who had put a bullet in the heads of a dozen brutal overseers, executed the worst factorum managers and tithe-extorters. She, who had killed the skitarii rangers who had come sniffing about Davien's home ground when they scented trouble, and had left no trace of their bodies. And now the priests' Ascension Day was looming large in the future, and it was to have been their rallying cry, the sacred banner lifted at last. The time when they would lead the oppressed of Morod into the streets. A desperate plan, born of hope and prophecy. If you were one of the true faithful. If you believed, as Davien *believed* with all her substance, that one day all this misery would be transformed to joy.

But their champion, their hero, had failed. She had crept all the way into the Fabricator General's presence, but some misstep had hauled the bloated tyrant out of her aim at the last moment. Burzulem still lived, and Sakiri had been caught. And the news had been bottled up between the senior tech-priests for far too long, as the blemishes on Burzulem's hide were repaired and a fresh polish was applied to the great dome of his body. She'd only got word hours after the fact, long after she should have been home with her family. Because Ascension Day was looming and the conscription pool was out on the streets, taking its due from the abused people of Auctorites.

The districts closest to the Palatium Lucidium, wealthy and favoured, had little to fear. The squads and machines of the pool would already be spreading outwards, heading for the poor tenements like her own. Close to the palace there was only a keen anticipation for the festivities to come. In the Dodecahedral Plaza before the main doors, a crowd had gathered in their fine clothes, all that red and white, black and gold, to hear a sermon. Davien ducked about the outside of it, the preacher's sonorous words rolling over her head.

She had been six years old when she'd understood that there were crucial differences between the church services she attended in the subterranean

chapel of her home, and those of the Ministorum. Not that her family weren't religious. They were, if anything, far more devout than this braying crowd chanting the approved catechism back with mechanical precision. Davien had been raised to *believe*, with a fierce burning fire she felt within her like a physical thing. When her preacher spoke about the promises of the Emperor, something tugged within her mind and she *knew* it to be true. Her faith would have impressed an inquisitor. If only it had been faith in the same thing.

They called themselves the Congregation of the Divine Union. Long ago the sect had been a family affair: mine workers, factorum hands, banding together for strength against a world – and an administration – that was trying steadily to kill them. Banding together under a promise of better times ahead. The workers had sought hope; the preachers with their new creed had sought converts. Between the anvil of the poisonous world and the hammer of the Taskmasters, something new had been forged that the tech-priests had never guessed at.

These truths were self-evident, to Davien; taught to her from infancy, yes, but more than that, she *knew*.

That the Emperor loved her. No deviance from standard texts there.

That the stars were the Emperor's angels, looking down from the heavens and judging His servants. And here the creed crept out from the shadow of orthodoxy.

That a time would come when those angels would descend to Morod and reward the faithful, transforming them into something divine and beautiful. A time that was always coming; a beacon of hope for the weary and the oppressed. Because the Emperor was for the people, not just the great lords in their palaces. The Emperor sought union with all.

The chapel beneath Davien's home tenement had a sculpture of the Emperor on the wall, looking down benevolently upon the faithful. It had been carved over generations with mining tools stolen from the works. To show that He valued each and every one of them, the sculptors had given it many arms. To show that He knew the privations of Morod, the Emperor's head had been depicted in that peculiarly elongated shape so many of Davien's older relatives displayed, the Aunts and Uncles who kept out of sight in the deeper chambers and the windowless rooms. *That* was her Emperor. When she'd finally seen the bland representations in other chapels

she'd been shocked: a nondescript enthroned form, almost faceless, so generic in the artist's attempt to stand in for all humanity that the end result had been distant and inhuman as a robot. What was *that*, compared to her own place of worship: the welcome of all those reaching hands, the warmth of that so-wide smile? That was where they had learned their faith, Davien and her brother Niem.

Thoughts of Niem spurred her on. She hopped on a transport car and rode its single rail halfway out towards the poor districts that lined the chasm of Auctorites' southern spur, then jumped off as it slowed for the Nilhetum Factorum depot, pelting through streets that were swirling with anxious people. And too late, too late already. She saw the red of the skitarii ahead, a squad of twenty of their vanguard. They were going house to house with their census, taking their due. The conscription pool had arrived. Two heavy wagons half-blocked the road, their beds just cages, three-quarters full already. In one she saw only children, from babes ripped from their mothers' arms through to baffled, squalling youngsters of seven or eight, conscripts for the Imperial armies, to be made into skitarii themselves, their ailing flesh replaced by metal, their wills replaced by enforced obedience. And there were older conscripts, men and women on the cusp of adulthood and already bent and scarred from what life on Morod did for you, penned up to be thrown into the meat grinder that was the Astra Militarum. The blood that watered the fields of Imperial victory, as the bitter saying went. In a cycle precisely monitored by the calendars of the tech-priests, that yet never quite mapped onto Morod's grinding year, Ascension Day had come around again, and the poor districts of the city were being gutted to fill quota.

The other wagon held a grab bag of people from all walks. She saw some of the Congregation there, too late for her to help. Alongside them were workers who'd been mauled by the factoria but hadn't died, miners with lost limbs, children born mutated or deformed to poisoned mothers. Those judged not fit to work who had now been judged not fit to live. They wouldn't be going to fight the Emperor's wars. They'd be part of the Ascension Day celebrations instead.

A woman's strident wail split the air. 'He's my only son! You can't have him! You're not allowed!' Because, like every other thing on Morod, the conscription pool worked to strict regulations. They were to take the

surplus, that was the theory. But Davien could hear the amplified tones of the vanguard alpha telling the woman that she was listed as having three children and could spare one for the Onnissiah's glorious service.

'They died!' she shrieked, actually beating her withered fists on the man's breastplate. 'They died in your factories! You can't take my only son!'

'Records show you failed to correctly complete the appropriate notifications of demise,' the alpha told her, and then turned away, heedless of her rage, as his followers hauled the man out. By then, Davien was past the crowd and already running.

She had almost been one of those conscripts, back years ago, almost before she could remember. The conscription pool had come calling, and there had been playmates gone the next morning, dim faces missing from her life. A sense of absence, like a missing tooth. And those absences weren't so unusual. Life on Morod was dangerous. A cave-in or industrial accident could wipe out a generation. An eruption of gas, a misfiring machine, perhaps a new seam of radioactive ore that the tech-priests would divert them to mine: death not just incidental but as a weighed and calculated cost attached to the desired outcome. The people of Morod were a resource just like the minerals in the ground, to be harvested for the greater glory of the Onnissiah. But a loss to the conscription pool cut deeper. The young and fit who were taken went to serve in the wars of an Emperor who was not the figure celebrated in their religious rites. The children and babies went to become faceless cyborgs just like the skitarii even now reaping their harvest from the poor districts. Davien had grown up in a world marked by such absences. Soon enough she felt it was just her and Niem. And now Niem was sick, just like so many of the workers fell sick.

Sick, but getting stronger. Not just better, as in recovering, but *better*. Doctor Tesling had been tending to Niem, *changing* him so that he could be robust enough to conquer the toxins and the organ damage that life on Morod had gifted to him. But the process was only part complete, and Niem wouldn't be able to run when the pool came knocking...

In oneclave the workers were in open revolt, trying to hold the conscription pool off. It wasn't somewhere the Congregation was strong. If it had been, then probably they wouldn't have risen up. Not that the Congregation preached obedience to the tech-priests, but the creed was

always to await the right time. Hearing the merciless crackle of the skitarii guns, watching the tall, birdlike shapes of the Sydonian Dragoons stilt against the rising flames, she knew the rioters would achieve nothing.

If only Sakiri had succeeded. With the Fabricator General dead, the Mechanicus hierarchy might contract into itself. A full-scale uprising could have had a chance. But now the tech-priests were united in their purpose. They were harvesting the people of Auctorites.

She needed to get to Niem, but there was more screaming and the grinding of great engines from ahead of her. The conscription pool was sweeping through the city like a plague.

When Niem fell sick, she'd taken him to Doctor Tesling, just like everyone did. The tech-priests would spare no medicine for workers, but at least the Congregation tried. Tesling's medicine was half study of stolen books and half revealed knowledge passed down from the elders, but he gave the faithful whatever treatment he could. His trim, white-coated figure could often be seen doing the rounds of his clinic. Davien and Niem had been a particular concern of his. He'd brought the pair of them through several epidemics that raced through the close-packed tenements of South Chasm, treated mortifying flesh wounds, and now he was working with Niem.

Doctor Tesling said there was a hidden strength in Niem. 'The organic and the inorganic,' he'd explained in his customary cheery manner. 'Our masters would tell you that the inorganic is always to be preferred, but sometimes we can turn the tables. Sometimes it is the flesh that can rise to the occasion, hmm?'

And Niem's flesh had been shifting and changing, different each time she had visited the clinic. In Doctor Tesling's back-room laboratory, strapped to a table so he couldn't injure himself or others, Niem had been going through transformations. He would live, Doctor Tesling promised her, but he would have to be reported as dead to the census. He wouldn't be able to go outside freely in daylight, not until the blessed day of revolution the elders assured everyone was coming.

And that hopeful thought buoyed her almost all the way to her home tenement. That one day soon – in her lifetime, in her near future even! – the Congregation would lead the beaten and oppressed people of Morod in a crusade of their own. They would scourge the powerful from their palaces and tear them piece from mechanical piece. The Emperor's angels would

see them, in their faith and purity, and descend to consummate the Blessed Union.

And then she was in sight of the tenement, and the skitarii were already breaking their way in, hauling out her neighbours and her friends. And a squad was delving further, a great hungry machine tearing up the plascrete to get into the spaces beneath, exposing it all to Morod's baleful sun. She saw the cramped rooms of her family and kin unearthed by its metal jaws, and then a grander space beyond: they were pouring down into Doctor Tesling's clinic, trampling the beds of the sick and injured in their haste to get inside.

OceanofPDF.com

3

The mines will keep turning out their mutations, will they not? That had been Burzulem's assessment. Gammat Triskellian was far from sure that was the case. But then Burzulem wasn't really interested in the organic processes and misfires that led to mutation. If a part was imperfect, then cut it from the whole, that was his creed. A library of mouldering texts, liturgies of the human body, its uses and functionality, all wasted on the Fabricator General. Year on year, Triskellian had scraped and scavenged for resources for the handful of genetor priests still clinging on in Burzulem's administration, seeking to test the old knowledge and even – horror of horrors – perhaps add to it in some small way. 'Rediscover', as it would only ever be known.

He had read over some small fragments of a text, once, about the creation of the Adeptus Astartes, the Emperor's resplendent champions. His only conclusion had been, *If we had been as blind back then as we are now, what stunted, miserable things we would have created.* They had *understood* the organic sciences, back then. What was done by rote now had to have been *discovered* by enquiring minds in the mists of time, all those enhanced organs and faculties. Every Space Marine was a miracle of biological engineering, and yet Burzulem dismissed as 'unconscionably radical' Triskellian's every plea to study how the parts of the human body might be improved, rather than simply replaced.

And he had taken samples from the three-armed assassin, cut from her tough flesh as she snarled and snapped at him. He had interrogated his scrapings with the wheezing deduction engines that subjected them to a questioning the Inquisition would approve of. Poisons, radiation, physical

trauma – pushing their resilience past breaking point because the only way you could know how tough a thing was, was to break it.

And he found he knew the pattern. He'd observed it before, though not in such concentrations. Those times he'd been able to scrounge live subjects for testing, there had been strains of the Morod populace who had displayed resistances and immunities that had pricked his interest. And, like Burzulem, he'd thought *mutation*, but unlike his superior, Triskellian dared to consider how that mutation might be put to use.

By that time, obviously, he had run out of subjects. As noted, the only way you could know how tough a thing was, was to break it. He was left only with his records, great long scrolls of calculations through which a disquieting thread ran. There was something about certain Morod bloodlines that was... different. Different to the regular run of mankind, yet consistent within itself. A most durable and persistent 'mutation'.

In certain texts, prescribed and fenced about with Inquisitorial seals, there were complex tests one could administer to the mutant and the deformed. There was a litany of signs and omens, responses to certain diagnostic compounds, a secret language written in the shape of the eye, the number of the teeth, the fine structure of the skin and joints. And these signs pointed not to mere human deviance but something darker. Yet the texts Triskellian had access to were maddeningly incomplete and Burzulem had no interest in expanding that section of the Palatium library. 'Insalubrious,' as he said dismissively. 'If your hand offends you, Visceral, just cut it off and fix up a new one. Don't dabble your other fingers in the pus of the wound.'

And of course that was a sore point, now. His new arm was slow in taking. Triskellian had enough self-knowledge to suspect his own attitude was interfering with his control of it. The mechanical limb was a heartbeat slow in its responses, the three-fingered hand fumbling, now feeble, now destructively strong. His mechanical eyes had been easier to come to terms with, but then he'd endured the surgery and the discomfort stoically, desperate to return to the lab.

And, even while he was trying to come to terms with the artificial limb, this nonsense: Ascension Day.

Being placed in charge of the Auctorites conscription pool was an honour on paper, a tedious chore in reality. It took Triskellian from his worship, that study of the sciences whereby a priest might come to truly know the will of

the Ommissiah. To spend days grinding through the worst streets of the city with the cage-wagons, census in hand and beating at every door, left him feeling wasted. And, as he got further from the Palatium and into the poor districts, the census became worthless and it was a matter of just going street by street and rounding up every likely subject. Every half-hour the burning red pain in his mangled shoulder would rise up inside him, and he would have to adjust the flow of numbing compounds feeding into his abused flesh.

Ascension Day: the high point of the Morod calendar, if you were a compliant member of the priesthood. There were ships in orbit, ready to take the planet's tithe of flesh and blood, kith and kin. The practice had become an excuse to celebrate under Burzulem. There would be fasting, the mortification of the flesh and the scouring of the machine. There would be a feast and the priesthood would offer up in flames those defective things it wished to purge from itself. Like people. The assassin's execution would be only the centrepiece of a greater cleansing. *Through such fires are we tempered*, Burzulem would proclaim, as always. *So our impurities are burned away*.

Triskellian hated it. The only true worship was in knowledge, that was his creed. Casting these wretches into the fire was a waste of material that could go towards his own experiments into measuring the toughness of the flesh. Every moment he was out here on the streets was a moment of true reflection and worship denied him.

In his ear – another augmetic replacement – he heard the voices of his skitarii officers. They had run into resistance in the nextclave. The locals had barricaded the streets, and now thronged eight storeys of windows and walls, shouting, waving banners, throwing stones and shooting simple guns. They were one of the mine-workers' collectives, that had suffered recently from failed air-pumps and inadequate safety protocols. Now they were to lose the youngest and strongest of their offspring to the conscription, and the weakest to the offering, and they weren't having it.

Triskellian sighed. The world seemed determined to complicate his life, when all he wanted to do was return to the laboratory. He ran through the passages of the prescribed cantic against civic disobedience, constructing an appropriate protocol to inload to the skitarii. The squad alphas replied one by one with the correct response. His words would reconfigure their

very minds, making them fit for urban warfare. Making them not care that the people he was setting them on might have been their own families once. They would clear the street without mercy, set an example that would have the clave falling over itself to offer up its finest for the pool.

He had never considered himself a battlefield commander, but Burzulem would excoriate him over any waste and so he sent a couple of servo-skulls to hover over the fracas so that he could adjust the skitarii's priorities. The locals had nothing going for them but construction tools and brute animal aggression, but the close confines meant they had been able to close with the skitarii, pitting themselves against the cybernetic strength of the Adeptus Mechanicus soldiers. The line of steel and red cloth held, gun butts bludgeoning away with a mechanical rhythm. One or two fell, though, and there were enough of the rioters that sheer mass was forcing the line back.

Triskellian hissed through his teeth at the indignity of it all and took quick stock of what resources were close by. At his signal, a pair of dragoons stalked in. He'd hoped their tall shapes would break the spirit of the crowd, but apparently things had advanced too far for that. It was time to exhaust some labour resources in order to teach a salutary lesson to the rest. He ordered the dragoons forward, watching their long legs carry them at a charge down the street, shoulder to shoulder, lances levelled. Behind them, a third tall shape moved into sight, one of the Ironstrider Ballistarii armed with a pair of autocannons.

Quite literally overkill. Briefly, he considered ordering the gun-platform to hold off, in case the Sydonians' charge carried the day, but he was keenly aware of wasting time. There would always be more workers, but *time* was a resource both precious and irreplaceable. *Fire*, he signalled, and the operator loosed over the heads of the skitarii, a barrage of munitions thundering into the rear of the crowd, tearing apart their close-packed ranks. For a moment there was enough loose biology misting the air to send Burzulem into fits, and after that the spirit of the rioters was satisfactorily broken. As was the tenement building they had been pressed up against, in fact, the wall sloughing into the road and exposing a maze of little cells and rooms that had each been a family's home. Plenty of the non-combatant denizens were under the rubble, but that still left plenty of them penned in by the skitarii, awaiting disposal.

He inloaded a replacement catechism for the lead alpha, allowing the

cyborg to better assess each candidate. The infants and the strong for one wagon, the badly injured, sickly or maimed for another. *Trimming away the scrap from the true*, Burzulem would say. And those in-between would have the privilege of going back to their mines and manufactoria for the greater industry of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

The fighting at the far end of the street was almost done, now; just a few pockets of resistance as the workers were brutally disabused of their notions. Triskellian looked over the mass of penned humanity thoughtfully, then inloaded a slight variant to the regular catechism, waiting to see if the alpha would protest or return any errors. The officer went on sorting, though, now with a third category.

There were only a handful with the particular deviations he was interested in. *If I cannot be in my laboratory*, Triskellian decided, *I will bring my research with me*. He tested each cursorily, finding most to be no more than victims of bad air and toxic metals, twisted at birth or during the course of their rough lives. But there was one... He had devised his own diagnostic tool for work on the assassin. It reacted to the presence of certain curious properties, not usually found in human blood. It was an *innovation*, and he knew it was less than reliable, but where better to test it than in the field?

One particular subject: she had been badly injured by the collapse, but he could see she'd been strangely formed already. There was a cancerous-looking swelling about one armpit that might have been the stump of a vestigial limb. Her skull was long. She was clutching a string of beads in her hands, whimpering over a prayer: *Emperor preserve me, Emperor catch me with your many hands*. The rosary coiled through her fingers like a segmented worm.

'Where is this woman from? Is she assigned for residency in this habclave?' he demanded of the prisoners. He didn't think so; he felt he was on the trail of a bloodline, not just random mutation. Where were all her relatives?

Someone came forwards, perhaps hoping to earn better treatment, or resenting the woman's whining or the way she looked. Someone gave him a clave where *they* could be found.

There was a precisely worked-out itinerary for all the conscription pool squads, a series of exacting instructions on numbered lines like a program for the skitarii. He couldn't just make on-the-fly decisions to divert the

heart of his force for his own base curiosity.

Or, rather, the word was *shouldn't*.

The biopsy material he had abstracted from the assassin had shown some very promising results when subjected to all manner of stressors. Suspiciously promising, he had to admit. Reacting to things that would kill a human almost as if the tissue welcomed the challenge. And he should – again *should* – recoil from differences that placed the results outside the safe corridor of human variance. Save that he saw a toolkit there, for strength and endurance. Such possibilities...

It is necessary that I investigate. I am only exercising the mind the Ommissiah blessed me with. And he was filing the changes, amending the program so that *this* squad slowed its advance, *that* squad deviated to cover the clave Triskellian had been about to advance into, while *he*...

He inloaded the data across the South Chasm districts, imagining the whole skitarii force faltering in lockstep as its priority list was rearranged. *Obey me.* And he was good at managing the troops, he knew. Burzulem and his favourites so seldom had to get their hands dirty with those sort of field logistics, and it wasn't the first time they'd devolved menial duties onto 'Visceral' Triskellian. It meant that, come the crunch, he was better at coding instructions for the skitarii than they were.

'Adept?' The closest alpha was staring at him, or at least the cluster of lenses and hoses that was the man's face had turned his way. Behind it, the surviving portions of his human mind would be wrestling with the new instructions, trying to fit them in with the existing plan. But it wasn't for the skitarii to question their masters, and he just sent a reinforcement of his order that had the alpha scurrying to obey.

As simply as that, it was done. Triskellian would turn this circus into an opportunity for science. He had expanded the conscription pool protocols to create a third category of prisoner: research subjects.

And, if his conscience pricked him about going beyond the boundaries of his task, there was a decade of resentment built up in Gammat Triskellian to shout it down. Because he was at the very scalpel's cutting edge of the Genetor order, tech-priests whose field of study was the human body and how it might be maintained, preserved and improved, and yet Burzulem and his clique cared nothing for it. Triskellian had presided over the autopsies of a score of skitarii who had collapsed when their living cores

had been unable to sustain the pistoning fury of their prosthetics. He *knew* that the secret was not just to cut further. If the flesh could be strengthened, there would be no limit to the artificial extensions that might be made to the human body. But time and again he was denied.

‘The *soft sciences*,’ Burzulem would mouth. ‘Getting your hands *dirty*.’

And Alloysia would echo, ‘Unsanitary.’

If only it had not been him. Triskellian remembered, all those years ago, waiting to hear who would be appointed Fabricator General when the previous incumbent’s systems finally failed. There had been complex elections and negotiations, and the calculating engines had gorged on data from across the planet. He, Gammat Triskellian, had been a front runner. He had been poised to lead their world into a future of rediscovery and faith through experiment. Life had seemed so full of promise.

But Burzulem had beaten him to the post, preferred by their peers and favoured by the calculations of the engines. And in the many years since, Triskellian and his fellows had diminished, been overlooked, derided, consigned to the degrading and the menial. *Wasted*.

In that angry frame of mind, Triskellian and his troops marched into the clave that had supposedly produced the deviant. The full cage-wagons had been sent back to the Palatium and fresh empties had arrived. He was ready to reap whatever harvest this district would yield for him.

At first sight there was little difference here to the tenements he had already moved through, save that the walls were still intact and the streets were clear. Nobody had tried to throw up barricades or organise a futile resistance. The skitarii were already pounding on doors, and at first it seemed he had been lied to, that he had sinned by deviating from the prescribed plan, and gained himself nothing. The census was checked, line by line. A quota of children was offered up, meagre but within tolerance. There were precious few sick or feeble who could be taken as offerings. Suspiciously few, he might have said.

There were entries in the district records. These poor claves had suffered savagely in past generations. Earlier conscription pool visits had hollowed them out, and there had been mine accidents, a vitriol spill in the nearby factorum. There just weren’t many people *here*. Perhaps it was just an unlucky district, where superstitious workers always assumed the deformed or the destitute came from. Triskellian could feel his temper rising. *I’m*

squandered on this dross.

Be calm. Go over the data. Because that was like counting over the beads of an abacus or calculating prime numbers. It was the baseline of mindful worship, centring his thinking into the channels and conduits that befitted a tech-priest. And so he ran through the most recent batch of metrics from these new conscripts, turning the figures over in his head.

And stopped.

So very healthy, every one of them. Strapping conscripts for the skitarii, or perhaps destined to be the pride of some Guard unit. Not a mutation amongst them.

Morod was not a healthy world. The baseline toxins in the air, food and water didn't lead to robust people. Everyone outside the Palatium's comforts was a little sick. Not this lot. As though they'd been specially selected for this very purpose. And Triskellian should have just counted himself blessed and moved on to the next district. Any other tech-priest would have.

'Where's the rest of them?' he asked. A simple question nobody there had an answer to. And, when the skitarii and the locals alike stared at him dumbly, he said. 'Move into the buildings. A room-by-room search.' Because what he was seeing here was called, in the old texts, a *skewed sample*.

There was some protest when the skitarii kicked in the doors and shouldered their way into the tenements, but the locals' gambit had given the impression of docile servility so well that they were in no position to resist now. That left Triskellian out on the street with his personal guard and the wagons, waiting to see what might be lurking under these newly overturned stones.

There was graffiti on the nearest buildings, he saw. Nothing strange there: it was just about the only means of personal expression the South Chasm denizens really had. And it was almost disappointingly orthodox, really. No pornography or obscenities or revolution. A badly proportioned picture of a smiling Emperor, raining little stars down on a host of little stick people who were standing with their twiggy arms upraised in jubilation. But the more he stared at it, the more disquieting he found it. What he'd thought was just a lack of artistic merit began to look more and more like a style he couldn't quite appreciate. Surely that smile was too broad, almost ear to ear.

And the Emperor was depicted with a fan of arms, so as to pour out all the more blessings on His subjects. And some of those stick figures, yes, they had more limbs than was strictly necessary...

‘Adept.’ A signal from the skitarii alpha. ‘Report – we have encountered inconsistencies with the clave-plan filed at the central archive.’

‘Elaborate?’ Triskellian pushed forwards, adjusting his receiver so that he could hear the words over the groan of tortured plascrete and dropping rubble. At his thought, a servitor skull floated in to see.

‘Unlicensed excavations beneath the tenement, adept. The whole area may be structurally unsound.’

For a moment he assumed it was some lost mineshaft, but the skitarii were clustered around a hatch set into the ground. Sent down, the servo-skull revealed a claustrophobic chamber with several low doorways leading to more, and then more. Rag-shrouded figures scurried away from the skull’s light, hiding their eyes. There were skitarii down there already, grabbing people and hauling them, pale and wormlike, up into the light and air. Others were still proceeding, down into chamber upon chamber, a host of scrambling, shambling denizens scurrying like rodents before them. The skull’s relaying eye caught sight of the marks of that peculiar run of mutations. The most deviant of them could have been cousins to the assassin, their skin shading to bruise colours, horny and cracked at the joints, their teeth pronounced and sharp, their eyes amber or red.

‘Bring in an excavator,’ Triskellian ordered, feeling a thread of excitement pull taut within him. Within minutes, the machine was being hauled in from a nearby demolition site and, rather than risk his followers down in those increasingly tight and difficult spaces below, he determined he’d simply go at things in the most direct way.

The excavator was a bullish metal monster, a bulky Goliath chassis with a great assemblage of rock-grinding teeth mounted on its front. It could carve out a new quarry face from solid rock in an hour. The worm-eaten labyrinth of half-devoured earth beneath the tenement would take it moments.

He heard a shrieking and a clamouring from below, voices that sounded barely human in their panic and distress as the excavator advanced. The building above started to move, and suddenly, with a huge crash, half of it slipped away and collapsed, slumping into its neighbours, fissuring their walls. His skitarii scattered to avoid the debris. Triskellian barely noticed.

He was absorbed in what the skull was showing him past the Goliath's whirling teeth – chambers within chambers, hidden from Morod's orange sun for generations until he strip-mined into them. An unregistered mass of hideous, pallid people fleeing yet deeper into the earth like grubs winkled out from their burrows. The offering wagon would be packed full before he sent it back to the palace. And then a larger space, exposed like the egg chamber of some xenos hive-dweller. A long room lined with what seemed like corpses – no, *invalids*. 'Alpha, clear the room of mobile antagonists.'

'Confirmed, adept.' The skitarii set to kicking and beating anyone who could move, driving them away, leaving only those lying in neat rows along the wall.

They lay on mattresses packed so close not an inch of floor was visible, and they were sick, or some had the sort of injuries Triskellian was more than familiar with from the factories and forges. His skull's-eye view saw makeshift equipment attached to several, feeding them fluids, monitoring their vital signs. This was some kind of impoverished medical facility. The thought took him by surprise. He hadn't thought the denizens of these wretched districts had either the initiative or the knowledge for such a thing.

And there, a brief glimpse at the far end of the room, a man in a white coat, almost a parody of a physician, darting away into some further chamber.

'Haul them all out,' Triskellian ordered.

'A clash of priorities is detected,' the alpha informed him, hesitating. Triskellian hurriedly revisited the logic pathways of his orders and felt a stab of excitement. Were these invalids offerings, or were they his new research subjects? They looked as though they would fall equally into both categories.

'Just take them as offerings for now.' He would go through the cells later for any who met his criteria. He was head down himself, unable to simply remain distant and aloof. There was something strange here and he wanted to investigate it in person.

'Adept.' A signal from one of the detachments up on street level. 'The locals are massing. What are your orders?'

Triskellian sent the skull out. Its viewpoint showed him locals gathering in the adjoining claves. Suddenly there were scores of them, hundreds even. The skitarii had identified primitive firearms, industrial tools, even

explosives.

Triskellian pressed on, at the very front now, kicking in the next door himself, finding no trace of the man in white, just a little private chapel, bitter incense still burning. He was reconfiguring his own eyes, inloading fresh programs he flung together and changed moment to moment. He was half-convinced he'd imagined the medicae, the thought just conjured by the room full of patients.

Another signal from outside. There really was quite a crowd out there now, thronging the far end of the street. There was some kind of heavy machinery coming in, an earth mover or drill from the mines. The skitarii were digging in for a real fight, but Triskellian had no wish to get personally mired in that kind of distraction.

And there – molecular materials analysis showed him the other room beyond this one, reached through a sliding panel he'd never have seen with unaugmented vision. In moments his troops had broken through.

And stopped, awaiting instructions, because the protocols didn't cover this.

Triskellian stared. It was a laboratory. A lab put together by someone who only had access to what they could salvage or steal from the industrial workings, true, but a lab nonetheless. And one devoted to what Burzulem would disdainfully call the '*soft sciences*'.

The man in the white coat was at a table, frantically working away at something lying there. Triskellian pushed forwards and saw... a brute, was his unavoidable first impression. A huge figure, bulked out with uncontrolled excesses of musculature, skin partially hardened into something almost like carapace, shuddering and straining against its restraints. And the medicae was frantically...

Releasing it. He was freeing it from the slab. Triskellian leapt back, and at the same time the skitarii were pushing forwards, their priorities reconfiguring in response to the threat.

The thing sat up. By any conventional standards it was hideous, each part of it out of proportion with the rest and its face a fist-like knot of rage and agony. It was ten feet tall and almost as broad, lurching forwards to balance itself with the knuckles of one distended arm.

It bellowed, deafening in the enclosed space, and then lurched forwards, knocking three skitarii over, crushing one against the wall. The crackle of

carbine fire lanced into its rugged hide, charring and melting flesh without seeming to do anything more than enrage it. The skitarii shot it and beat at it and bayoneted it, and it barely slowed for them. It was clumsy and seemed to have an imperfect command of its colossal frame, or else it might have butchered the lot of them.

And it was an abomination. Obviously it was, but some part of Triskellian watched its flesh knit and mend even as it shuddered beneath the carbine-shot and thought, *Such regenerative properties!*

It smashed another skitarii down, a brief burst of error messages in Triskellian's head before the spark of its life went out. No matter. That service was what the soldiers of the tech-priests were made for. Triskellian, about to vacate the room until the fighting was over, abruptly changed his mind, risk versus research weighing in his mind. He scuttled past the beast as it bellowed and staggered, and ended up with his mechanical hand about the medicae's throat and a pistol pressed to the man's temple.

'Have it pacified,' he directed sternly.

'Please...' the medicae got out. With revulsion, Triskellian saw tears in his eyes as his monster was shot and battered.

'Have it pacified and I shall spare it,' Triskellian directed, not sure whether he was telling the truth or not.

With a whimper, the white-coated man made a convulsive gesture at one of the trays of haphazard instruments and medical tools. Triskellian released him, though the pistol tracked his every movement.

'Niem!' the man called, and the monster heeded him, the medicae's voice cutting through all that rage instantly. Triskellian called off the skitarii, watching intently.

'Here, Niem. Come here, now. There's a good boy.' The man's voice trembled wretchedly, but the monster shambled over and crouched before him obediently. With a quick motion the man had found a point of the thing's anatomy that would receive a needle, and injected it with something that had its form slump over into a mound of mismatched, slumbering flesh.

I should burn it, Triskellian thought. Something foul was going on here, something beyond the tenets of scriptural science. And, based on his prior researches, he rather thought he knew what it might be. *Burn it down, all of it. Annihilate theclave, the district. Cut away the diseased flesh.*

Instead he found himself saying, 'Secure the creature. And you, come

here.'

The medical man cringed over to him, a grovelling little thing in the shadow of the skitarii. Triskellian glowered down at him sternly, enjoying the man's terror.

'Designation, worker.'

'Tesling, adept,' the man whispered. 'They call me Doctor Tesling. I help here.'

'Help?' Triskellian indicated the monstrous thing. 'How does this abomination *help*?'

'He was sick, adept,' Tesling whimpered. 'But he is strong now. Strong enough to work. Strong enough to survive. Survive anything, adept.'

Burn them all. But Triskellian's mind was full of his own researches, the maddening gaps between his aspirations and his results.

'Take it all,' he ordered. 'Load them onto the offerings wagon and ready everyone to move on to the next district.'

When they saw he had their doctor, the crowd outside began to surge forwards. The skitarii started shooting, burning the boldest of them. Triskellian put out a call for a handful of dragoons to reinforce them. He marked how quickly they'd assembled, so many called in so short a time. His skitarii were already falling into the civic warfare protocols he'd prepared for them.

He sent the order to fall back and move on to the next district, rewriting the skitarii priority queues until they just packed up and retreated, the angry crowd left in undisputed possession of its home turf. No questions, nobody reporting him to Burzulem behind his back. He had made himself a key node in their hierarchy, the very voice of the Emperor as far as they were concerned. *I will burn it all down*, he assured himself. *Later. There is always later.*

He rode back atop the offerings wagon. The doctor hunched beside it, jostled and miserable, bruised where one of the skitarii had struck him. Triskellian was looking forward to examining the contents of the man's head.

4

‘They’re getting away!’ Davien pushed past a cluster of survivors, hunting out anyone in authority. The Congregation was in disarray, a great swathe of the faithful just taken, already receding in those two huge cages, and with them Niem, her brother. Or what Doctor Tesling had made of him.

‘Please!’ She could hear the crackle and buzz of the skitarii weapons, lancing the boil of the crowd outside before it could erupt of its own accord. ‘We can catch them!’

She could see through the broken doors and empty rooms to the further chambers, where the Aunts and Uncles lived. The conscription pool hadn’t pushed as far as it might, at least. They only had so much room in their cages. They hadn’t reached the Aunts and Uncles, still less the Great-Aunts and Great-Uncles: the elder generations of the Congregation waiting for the promised time when they could rise up and prove their worthiness to the Emperor.

And now that time had come, as far as Davien was concerned, and nobody was doing anything.

A stooped figure craned out of one of the dim inner rooms set one more level into the city’s foundations. Many of the Aunts and Uncles were so blessed by the Emperor that they could never be mistaken for a mere human, but the Magus Claress might just be a tired old woman. *Old*, on Morod, meaning she was surely past forty. Her waxy bluish-pale skin sagged in wrinkles and her eyes were yellow, and there were leathery ridges climbing up her forehead and back over her bald scalp. The ravages of time had swallowed up the marks of divinity, yet she still carried an ineffable weight of authority about her shoulders as she blinked in the dim light.

‘Magus!’ And Davien wasn’t sure where this impertinent courage was coming from, that let her stand in front of so august a figure and just shout. ‘They broke into the clinic. They took Doctor Tesling! They took *Niem!* And we can stop them. Call the Congregation to arms. There’s already a crowd out there!’ And, in the face of the old woman’s stare, ‘Every district will fight, if we show them the way! Everyone has lost sons and daughters to the pool, or lost their sick and injured as offerings! The city is like spilled oil awaiting the spark, magus!’ Not for the first time, Davien felt a tug in her mind as she pushed back against the magus’ authority, frustrated that she could not move the world herself. *We were promised a future! Why will you not give it to us?*

‘Sakiri has failed,’ Magus Claress whispered. The very news Davien had come to bring her, but of course if Burzulem was dead the tech-priests would not be out here so brazenly with their conscription pool. ‘It is not the time,’ the magus said. The old woman looked at the faces around her as though hunting out absences. Perhaps those who had just been taken, perhaps contemporaries who had died a generation before. ‘I had hoped... But no. We cannot rise up until the proper moment. It is not the time.’

And Davien had lived her life with those words. Every injustice handed down from on high, every accident caused by cut corners or the Mechanicus’ drive for resources and results, every time the overseers upped the quotas and reduced the rations. *We must do something!* someone would always cry, and the magus’ withered head would shake and she’d say, *It is not the time.* When Davien had been younger, that had sounded like wisdom, the long-term planning of a master game-player. Now she had a shocking moment of disillusionment. *A frightened old woman. Is that all she is?* Did the magus *fear* the blessed time of uprising? Would she rather live out her remaining years basking in the glow of an unattainable future than risk *acting*?

‘The time is now!’ she said – she’d meant to shout it, but in the face of all that misery her voice dwindled to a croak. ‘Please... My brother...’

Claress’ wrinkled lips twisted, and she held out stick-thin arms to embrace Davien. ‘It is not the time,’ she said again. ‘I listen, child. Every night I listen to the singing of the Emperor’s angels. They are closer, I know. They hear our hymns and know we are faithful, but it is not time, yet. We must hide ourselves away until the day comes. And if that means we sacrifice our

own to the tech-priests' fires, then that is how it must be. The Congregation must survive to pass down the truth to another generation.'

'But magus—'

'I know it is hard for you to wait. Patience comes with years, and so few of us can acquire either. I'm sorry, my child. I'm sorry for your brother. I'm sorry for all of us. We are being tested and must endure.'

And all around, the Aunts and the Great-Uncles were emerging from the deepest recesses of the tenement, the undersewers and the hidden cellars. Claw-nailed hands brushed her arm; hooked talons rested on her shoulder, trying to impart a solidarity that burned away in the fires of her own anger.

'Would you say that to Sakiri?' she demanded.

'If only she were here,' Claress whispered. 'Child, I will tell you the bitterest truth. This might have been the day. We were ready. The city was ready. The conscription pool could have been the moment when we taught all Morod the Many-Handed Emperor's promise to His children. If Sakiri had killed the Fabricator General, that might have been the flame with which to light the city. But she failed, and she is lost to us. And so it is not the time, nor shall it be.' A shuddering sigh went through the old woman. 'I shall not live to see it.'

'But magus.' Davien heard her own voice shake. 'We rose up here. We drove them away. Sakiri might be dead but—'

'She failed. She was taken. The Great Taskmaster Burzulem still lives, and Sakiri is buried beneath his palace. They will burn her with the others, at their great feast. I'm sorry, child. I waited so long for our time. I had thought...'

But Davien was already breaking out of her fragile embrace.

'No,' she said, and she wasn't sure where the courage had come from, to talk back to the magus like this. 'I'll go to the Palatium. I'll find Sakiri. I'll free her. I'll... kill the Fabricator General myself, if I have to.'

And she ran. Every step, she waited for the quavering voice to call her back, that command she couldn't disobey. She was of the Congregation, after all. There was a thread that tied her to her elders, and if they yanked hard enough on it, she would be back before them with all meek obedience. And yet the tug never came. The sad eyes of Claress and the other elders — human eyes, inhuman eyes — just watched her go, too broken and beaten even to call.

Getting into the Palatium Lucidium was easy. Her skin was imprinted with electroos and noospheric auras, forgeries and copies painstakingly needled into her flesh by Doctor Tesling. At the doors of the Palatium, the servitors mutely parsed the codes before letting her through, just one more cog in their grand machine. In the run-up to Ascension Day there was plenty of traffic between Lucidium and the city of Auctorites.

Getting in was one thing, of course. She knew roughly where the tech-priests held captives, but those wings of the palace were not somewhere a gutter clerk like her would be expected to present herself. These were not purpose-built cells, exactly, but test chambers given over to temporary storage of living bodies. The lords of the Adeptus Mechanicus would go there to select subjects for their experiments, to test this augmentation or that weapon. Nobody was a long-term resident there. If the testing itself did not destroy them, they would be incinerated later.

Davien had been a Lucidium clerk for two years now. The tech-priests had tested her for intelligence and initiative, and she had been more than able to parrot their orthodoxy back to them. Divine blood ran in her veins. She looked as human as anyone on Morod, but her mind was not dulled by the poisons and sicknesses that plagued the population at large. No wonder she was one of the few given a place at the Palatium.

Her journey through the palace was a stop-start of bureaucracy. Every junior tech-priest was the plaything of their superiors, which meant they wielded their iota of authority like a lash at every opportunity. Here was one now, a gangling adolescent, pallid skin turned red and angry about the freshly implanted cables beneath his ear.

‘You, clerk! Present yourself.’ His voice was nasal and high. ‘I have an important missive for you to carry.’ And she knew he had no such thing, but would simply concoct some meaningless code to pass to some other equally insignificant acolyte, just to feel himself part of the great machine of Lucidium. If she let him, he and those like him would devour her whole day with their meaningless shuttling back and forth.

‘Adept.’ And she bowed meekly enough, but within her sleeves her hands were pressing at the electroos set into her forearms, poking her nails painfully *here* and *here* until she had reconfigured the ephemeral codes that spoke from her body to the wider Palatium. ‘Forgive me but I am at the command of Hermeticus Abarandon. Please direct your query to an

available servant.’ And Abarandon was a good name to conjure with, senior both in authority and age, seldom seen outside his chambers to be questioned.

The junior was hard to put off even with that. She could feel him prying at the strictures of her electoos, desperate to feel himself superior to *someone*. ‘My missive is of surpassing urgency for the ongoing subroutines of the Omnissiah,’ he insisted reedily.

‘Forgive me, but I am bound by the overriding priorities of parsimony and cannot undertake any further tasks until current demands are satisfied.’ She knew all the proper calls and responses, addresses and quotes from scripture. Claress and the Aunts had tutored her extensively in that semi-familiar creed that felt like a twisted echo of the Congregation’s orthodoxy. *And so grim*. The litany of the tech-priests was all cogs in the machine, the privilege of being a small piece until you were ground down and replaced. The Congregation preached optimism. Davien had lived her whole life in the hope that she would see the day the Emperor blessed her world with His angels, descending like stars from the heavens to bring the promised Union between their divine flesh and that of their mortal faithful.

Soon enough she had dodged free of her interrogator and found what she was looking for. A hole in the wall where repairs were being made.

Lucidium was a building of many walls, and in the mists of time they had moved and shifted at the tech-priests’ whim, the whole building a colossal sliding block puzzle. Those mists had so rusted the mechanisms that none of it moved now, but the walls were still full of ancient machinery, ducts and power lines, each one a hollow maze in miniature. And Davien was small and lithe, and had spent her childhood getting in and out of twisted spaces.

She entered the walls, writhing and clambering through the jigsaw of interlocking gaps within them, scrambling up and down conduits, dropping past the stilled blades of great fans, landing in the cold bellies of extinct furnaces. In her mind was a plan of the Palatium, and where those off-limits test chambers were. She burrowed through the fabric of Lucidium like a worm until the last hatch opened creakily and she saw below her a chamber lined with great bell jars. These were the cells used by the adepts for their experiments, thirteen feet high, made of a clear armaglass which was as tough as plasteel unless precisely the correct frequencies were used to

disrupt it. Those stored within could be held indefinitely, or else the container itself could become a fatal testing chamber for whatever gas or weapon the tech-priests wished to deploy.

There were skitarii on the move below, and she froze, watching the red-coated cyborgs manhandle another string of bound prisoners along a gantry, dropping them into a jar without much care for how they landed. Many of the captives had to be virtually dragged along, too weak or sick to walk on their own. Some looked as though they'd already died since being taken by the pool. These were not the conscripts, destined to fight in the Imperium's wars. These were the offerings, whose agonies would serve as a highlight to the tech-priests' great celebration. Davien bared her teeth at the thought. She knew the doctrine well enough. The Adeptus Mechanicus claimed to be working towards perfection. They preached the creed of the forge and the factorum, where things were remade and tested. And, where testing revealed flaws, they held it an act of faith to consign the broken and the weak to be melted down. Davien knew well that they would look upon most of the Congregation and burn them in a heartbeat. *Cruel, they are cruel.*

When the skitarii had gone, she let herself down to the gantry, creeping along and peering into each glass cell in turn. She saw some of the Congregation there, one jar filled with beaten, listless people from her own clave, and a scattering across the other cells. Her hands itched to try and rescue them, but there was no way she could get them out of the palace undetected. Sakiri, though... Sakiri was a hero. She had struck against the tech-priests time and again. She was swift and strong and blessed. Surely Davien could release her and bring her back to Claress, and the magus would smile at her again, and there would be *hope*.

In the furthest bell jar she saw Sakiri, alone. They had not been kind to her.

She was pinned to a frame, all five limbs outstretched, with a host of instruments around her. There were tubes jammed into her flesh, into the softer skin between her joints. One of her eyes had been removed, and several of her teeth and nails. She had been left with no more clothing than the prudishness of the tech-priests mandated, meaning her divinely touched physiology was on full display. To Davien, she was beautiful, a being in whom the divine bloodline ran strong. The long sweep of her skull, the polished ridges of her armoured skin, the sickle claws of her third hand, all these things spoke of the Many-Handed Emperor's love for His chosen. To

the tech-priests, they would be merely something imperfect to consign to the fires.

And they were not taking her threat lightly, even secured as she was. A full dozen skitarii stood around her cell, staring outwards as though Sakiri disgusted them. Davien crouched above them, trying to think of some distraction she could engineer to draw them away. Her mind was full of wild thoughts: freeing Sakiri, who would somehow turn from this tattered thing to a righteous avenger once more, tearing through the Palatium, waving the banner of the Many-Handed Emperor from its balconies... She almost missed the feet on the gantry, feeling the vibrations through her hands and knees just in time to scurry back to her niche within the wall.

It was a tech-priest, the devices on his robes speaking of seniority within the Genetor order. A contradiction, then: a man who should have been powerful, save that his particular craft was not well regarded on Morod. And familiar: surely the man who had led the charge against Tesling's clinic. And alone.

He stared down at Sakiri, much as Davien had, and then stepped over to a bank of levers, throwing them in a complex order until a sling descended from above and the hatch atop Sakiri's jar groaned open. The skitarii below did not react to the sound, which could only mean that he had sent them a voiceless instruction to that effect. Davien hunched closer.

He was an odd, lean man, his eyes just blue crystal lenses edged in brass, set into the angry skin of his brow. One of his limbs was a fabrication of metal bones and the cables of artificial muscles – not unusual for a tech-priest save that he seemed to be awkward with it, the steel hand fumbling with the hoist controls. She saw a bandolier of empty canisters slung across his chest, rattling against each other and getting in his way. Then he had stepped into the sling and was being lowered into the jar with a hiss of steam that momentarily obscured everything.

When the air cleared, he was hanging over Sakiri, not risking getting within reach of her even though all three arms were pinned back like a dissection subject.

'Justice Recipient 11,289,221,' the priest intoned. 'Our arbites engine has cross-referenced your details with current case files. Fifteen open cases are tagged to your identity. Do you want me to list them?' His voice was like old, dead things. Most of the priests weren't used to idle conversation.

Sakiri's long head shifted and she glowered up at the man. 'If they're for killing your kind, I confess to all of them. Death to the oppressors. Death to the Hollow Men!' Her voice sounded weak, but the defiance in it thrilled through Davien, kin speaking to kin. She found herself mouthing the words too.

The tech-priest chuckled like broken gears and his hoist dropped him another jerky yard down. He glanced out at the skitarii, an oddly furtive gesture, and when he spoke, his tone was curiously low. 'I know what you are.'

'You know nothing, Taskmaster. Your time is coming.'

'A very particular bloodline, distributed through the claves of the South Chasm. Unauthorised representations of the Omnissianic Emperor that would have the Inquisition scrambling to pay your kin a visit, the moment I transmitted the images. A tendency to mutations which, viewed in aggregate, seem too uniform to be the results of mere teratogenic chance.' Again that cracked laugh. 'You are something more than a mere assassin.'

Yes, she is our champion, Davien thought. Sakiri had been killing overseers, tax-gatherers and skitarii for a year, working up to her assault on Burzulem.

'I am the justice that is coming from beneath your boots, enslaver,' Sakiri hissed.

'You are a corrupted hybrid of human and xenos,' the priest snapped. 'Do not think your rhetoric fools me. I have access to knowledge you cannot imagine. I have fed you into the teeth of our engines and the results tell me everything about what you are and the filth that has engendered you. But I've caught you too soon, haven't I? Let me guess, the Fabricator General's death was supposed to be the start of it.'

'You know nothing,' Sakiri repeated. Her defiance had ebbed, though. In its place was not despair, but a curious humour, even though she was hanging from pins and hooks. 'The day will come when the sky is radiant with the Emperor's countless young, Taskmaster. We will join with them in the Blessed Union, and no human will own another, nor force them to toil.'

'Well it is not today, and you'll never see it. They'll excruciate you on Ascension Day, and Burzulem and his cronies will warm their hands at a fire of your deviant kin.' The bitterness in his voice had shifted; Davien felt it wasn't Sakiri he was sour at, right then. 'But you can still help me,

creature.'

'I will choke you,' Sakiri hissed at him. He was very close now, and she craned her neck forwards, wide jaw gaping as she tried to get her teeth into some part of his flesh.

'You've already helped.' The dreadful rattle and catch of that laugh. 'I have analysed your flesh, creature. It led me to your kin in the city. I have reaped a grand harvest of them, though none as magnificently twisted as you. I have learned the secret of what you are, and soon I'll have your little infection properly anatomised. For which purpose.' And his mechanical arm shot out, a helix of needles abruptly sliding from the knuckles. It was an artless motion, practically punching Sakiri in the chest as he rammed them home. Davien saw the canisters on his bandolier fill unevenly, each fed by a hose from a different needle.

'You will be made to serve,' the tech-priest said softly. The hate was mostly gone from his voice now. He sounded almost fond. 'You are but components in the great machine. Misaligned components, but sometimes there is serendipity in a defective part or an unintended connection. There is no greater power in the universe than the ingenuity of mankind, before which all things shall bow.' He was muttering low to himself now, so that Davien had to lean forwards to catch the words echoing from the mouth of the jar. 'Shall the minds that created the Adeptus Astartes and designed the Golden Throne be daunted by this xenos infection? No, it shall be dissected and understood, and if it contains virtues, they, too, shall serve the destiny of mankind. Shorn of their corrupted heritage, they shall serve.'

And then the hoist was abruptly in motion again, and she scurried back as he was lifted from the jar, and its hatch resealed.

For a moment he was there, close enough to touch, suspecting no watchers and letting the remaining flesh of his face sag into lines of uncertainty and worry. He fingered the flasks of stolen blood and she saw his lips writhe back, teeth bared in a snarl. Then he was striding away, muttering to himself.

She should have stayed to wrestle with the controls, trying to replicate his opening of the hatch, save that the skitarii below were abruptly alert again, their enforced dormancy over. But she was curious. Why was this high-ranking tech-priest creeping about behind the backs of his fellows? More, he was the man who had taken Niem and Doctor Tesling, and they were

absent from the jar cells here. Had he already consigned them to the fires?

With an agonised look at Sakiri, she hurried on soft feet after the tech-priest. She would be back, she promised silently. But she had to know what had happened to her brother.

She trailed the priest through the lower levels of the Palatium, windowless and dark and peopled only by servitors and menial clerks like her. The doors opened for him as of right, while she had to stop before each portal and reconfigure the phantom authority lent to her by her electoos, persuading the ancient mechanisms that she was someone permitted past their bounds. Until at last the priest reached a door that led to chambers reserved for the adepts alone, some private laboratory or chapel. Instead of striding through, he had paused to work at a physical code-lock made of interlocking sections of bronze. Her ephemeral influence would not serve against something so brutally mechanical. He would lock her out.

She had one chance to follow him. She skipped to his very heels. As his metal hand skittered and wrestled with the logic codes of the door, she was close enough that she could have stabbed him. When he passed through, she was the soundless familiar in his very shadow.

Beyond the door, the air reverberated with the sound of engines, as though she were abruptly in the factories again. After so long in dingy halls and cramped corridors, the space here was huge, carved out between the columns of air-processing and purification pumps. Half of the ancient machines were still and dead, but the rest put out a constant rumble that shook every bone in her. The tech-priests must be able to tune it out, she guessed, or how would anything get done?

Amidst the columns she saw one of the bell jar cells, transported here by who knew what contortions. There was a vast form of flesh squatting in it that could barely be reconciled as human – hands with the fingers fused together, a vestigial limb spasming to be free of the ribs it had grown from. She saw a broad head with two yellow eyes and a human blue one beside it, as though some process of division was trying to split him in two from the top down. And a tail: he had a tail now, ridged and tipped with a bony blade. Every line and spur and scale of him, though it might seem monstrous to another, was to a plan that spoke to her. He was hatching from his humanity into something more perfect. His very flesh was yearning to

escape the gross cage of the anthropoid form, to explode outwards into the perfection of the angels. Her heart caught in her throat.

She ran to the jar, looking for controls, levers, anything so she could open his prison and lift him out. He was monstrous. He was her brother, Niem.

He knew her. He lurched to the clear wall of his prison, one horn-nailed hand clawing at the inside. She placed her own hand against the glass and he matched her gesture, putting her in his shadow. She felt a sudden stab of... jealousy, almost. That it had been him to fall ill; that it had been him to receive this divine blessing through the hands of Doctor Tesling. Even though it had left him a prisoner here, and even though his stare was filled with mute agony.

And filled with warning, too. Perhaps he even spoke, called her name, shouted for her to flee. The jar insulated her from his words, though, and then the metal hand of the tech-priest was pincering her shoulder.

‘What have we here?’ the tech-priest hissed, twisting her round to face him. ‘One of Burzulem’s spies, is it, or...?’ She saw the iris shutters of his lenses narrow as he analysed the girl before him. ‘Or something else indeed?’ She felt a sudden jab of pain, one of his needles questing into her flesh. ‘Blood will out. And until it does, *out* is where you will not go.’

5

Gammat Triskellian looked upon his life like a machine. It wasn't an uncommon conceit, amongst the Adeptus Mechanicus. There was a pleasing rhythm and routine to his dealings with the world. He had his clique from the Genetor order, with whom he worshipped. He had his allotment of regular checks and maintenance procedures about the Palatium that were less about repair and more about ritual. Several of the machines he was nominally responsible for had not worked since long before his birth, and in one case the engine's original function was lost to time, but on each prescribed day he would run through the long series of checks and tasks, removing and cleaning long-stilled parts, enacting diagnostics, throwing sequences of components into brief motion. It calmed his mind and enhanced his awareness of the generations of priests that had performed these same objectively meaningless tasks before him. It was a small cog in his routine that allowed everything else to turn correctly. His life was a train of such gears, each providing motive power to the next, and at the end of the train was his research. Here was where the machine acted upon the world; here was where the machine could turn back and improve its own workings so as to better approach the perfection of the Omnissiah. It was a tenet of Triskellian's life that nothing which brought his personal machine closer to that immaculate state could be bad.

He was midway through this comforting round of ritual repair when two of his fellow genetors found him, looking grave. Claven was the younger of the two, although successive grafts of skin meant any attempt at telling the man's age was doomed to failure. Some time ago he had attempted to show that the outer dermis of miners became tougher with their toil, and could be

harvested to reinforce the necessarily more fragile hides of the tech-priests themselves. He had been his own test subject, and in the end had failed to convince Burzulem or even, particularly, Triskellian. Now he was a patchwork of different skin tones and qualities, ragged-edged where his implants and conduits sat. His face was mismatched, one eye pulled half-closed, the mouth a crooked zigzag. Triskellian remembered him sewing it.

In company with him – constantly, of a necessity – was Herma Sectis, on her trolley. She was just a head and the upper half of a torso these days, with one functioning arm and one trailing dud. Beneath her truncated thorax a set of bellows wheezed and groaned, and a spiderweb of clear pipes carried ochre fluids lethargically in and out of her remaining substance. She was very old, and had once been Triskellian's own teacher, before the accident that had robbed the world of most of her. She could have replaced the missing pieces with prosthetics, of course, but the pain of the crushing wounds had triggered a weird kind of asceticism in her, whereby she claimed eschewing both the flesh and any substitute brought her closer to the ineffable understanding of the Omnissiah. Each year it seemed there was less of her, and some day there would be nothing, and perhaps she would be one with the infinite and find what she was looking for. For now, some of those tubes and ducts led from her trolley to Claven, who was tasked with pulling her around and keeping her alive. It was a charge he was morosely unenthusiastic about, which usually left Herma dragging behind him at the extent of her cabling.

Triskellian looked the two of them over. They weren't much, he was forced to admit, but of all his peers they were the only ones he felt he could trust. Only they knew just what he had installed in his quarters: the bell jar prison for the monstrosity, and the nervous little medicae with his heretical science.

'Gammat.' Claven's voice whispered between frayed lips. 'Gammat, terrible news. We're discovered.'

'There is nothing *to* discover,' Herma snapped, rolling to a halt behind him. 'We are about a perfectly righteous course of examination and investigation. Claven, you must stop talking.'

'But the Fabricator General—'

'Claven, let me speak. Your lips are defective.'

The pair of them would go on like that for as long as he let them so

Triskellian rapped on the casing of the machine he'd been examining, to grab their attention.

'What,' he asked them, 'has happened?'

'The Fabricator General summons you,' Claven moaned. 'He knows.'

'He doesn't know. There is nothing to know,' came the dissident chorus from Herma.

Claven picked agitatedly at the seams of his face, one of his less pleasant habits. 'We're harbouring mutants,' he whispered, 'and heretics. We should have sent them to the furnace. Gammat, there's still time. We could say we were holding them for Ascension Day. We could take them back to the cells. We could—'

'Enough,' Triskellian cut him off.

'And now this girl,' Claven went on, voice rising into a high whine. 'She's *staff*. Someone will notice she's gone. They'll come looking. They *have* come looking. That's why you've been called. This is *it*, Gammat. He'll do away with our order entirely. You've doomed us.'

A wickedly sharp spine extended from Herma's trolley and lanced Claven in the thigh with a crackle of lightning. He spasmed and sat down, whimpering.

'Everything will be well,' she told him beneficently. 'We serve the Omnissiah in this, as in all things.' And Triskellian would have been far more reassured by that if it hadn't been her standard line concerning just about anything. She was little more than an echo chamber, and her refusal to physically engage with the world was mirrored more and more by her mental attitude. Everything was destined. Everything would be well. He could receive endless reassurance from her but it would only be his own voice reflected back to him.

He had run through his catechism, examining each tenet, weighing the adjurations against corruption versus the exhortations to maintain and improve. *I serve*, he insisted. Even in so short a time, what he had teased out of the xenos gene-line opened up such possibilities. *How had Burzulem found him out?* Nobody else knew save Claven and Herma, and for all their faults neither of them would betray him. Unless Burzulem had suspected him even *before* any of this had arisen. Unless the Fabricator General had been hunting for an excuse to do away with an ambitious subordinate. They had always been rivals, back in the day before Burzulem's promotion.

Maybe the man had always been looking over what passed for his shoulder. In which case...

‘I will explain,’ he said quietly, knowing that no amount of explanation would suffice if Burzulem decided to play the inquisitor in earnest. ‘We do the Omnissiah’s sacred work here, however it may... seem at first. I will convince him.’

And he answered the summons, knowing that, if Burzulem had found him out, he most certainly couldn’t.

And of course, Burzulem hadn’t. A summons from the Fabricator General meant nothing these days. A minute spent in the man’s presence was merely a broken piece of Triskellian’s personal machine. Burzulem was a thing of *whim*, that most unforgivable trait in a tech-priest. He survived in his high office because he ensured that those with influence received all the resources and manpower they needed and the shipments of ore and parts to the wider Imperium were made on time.

The man considered himself an administrator. The machinery he tended was one of invisible logistics. In the pulpit, he would give sermons likening the Palatium to a great engine that required constant tuning. That was his justification for repeatedly loading the butts of his disfavour with menial tasks that interrupted their own worship and research.

‘We note that your conscription totals were eight point four per cent below your predecessor’s,’ Burzulem told him, when he arrived. ‘Very disappointing, don’t you think, Alloy?’

‘Below acceptable parameters.’ Alloysia was idly disassembling her robot’s right hand, comparing its workings to her own cybernetic equivalent.

And of course, there was a reason for the poor results of the pool. He stood very still and waited to see if observation would become accusation, but instead, Burzulem’s bell-like form drifted over to stare at his wall of art reflectively.

‘The offerings were down by seven point nine-eight per cent as well,’ he observed. ‘But I suppose the soft sciences were ever inexact. All that squish and squirm.’

‘Unhygienic,’ Alloysia put in. ‘Do away with them.’

‘If only we could, Alloy. How magnificent to be as pure as your Kastelan

there, all that inconvenient flesh just vanished away. Only our mighty brains left amidst the metal. How much more efficiently could we serve the Ommissiah?’

There was nothing *efficient* in Burzulem’s service, as far as Triskellian was concerned. His current occupation was a case in point. Here in his own private chambers were no machines, no laboratory equipment, but luxury. He had a kitchen staffed by servitors who created food he couldn’t taste. He had a grand circular window, carved out at his order and set with colours of stained glass his optics couldn’t appreciate. And he had his wall of art.

It was common knowledge amongst any rogue trader that might pass by Morod that the Fabricator General would buy art. He would divert a shocking proportion of mine or factorum output into the holds of any ship that brought him a new curio for his damnable wall. There were some geometrical pieces, non-representational repeating patterns and tessellations, and these at least Triskellian could appreciate on mathematical grounds. The rest were... portraits of Imperial dignitaries of ages gone by; inexpert renditions of the Emperor in His Radiance that made the graffiti of the South Chasm look accomplished; even loot hauled off from xenos craftworlds, holograms of fey-looking male and female aliens engaged in corrupt and blasphemous dances or portrayed against unwholesomely verdant landscapes. An inquisitor, Triskellian thought, would have a field day. *Here* was the true corruption, not the diligent search for truth Triskellian was conducting in his lab. Except that, as long as Morod kept producing, no inquisitor would come here. The world was itself just a cog, and if it wobbled under Burzulem’s hand, it remained within tolerance.

‘We have another little job for you, Visceral. Try to be better with this one, won’t you?’ Burzulem half-revolved to peer at him, the living sections of his face set in a smile that was at least five parts sneer. ‘Oh, I know, your research, your little projects. Well, we have a small engagement called *Ascension Day*. Only happens once every couple of decades or so. You should check your calendar more often. All hands to the pumps, isn’t that right, Alloysia?’

‘Maybe he doesn’t understand pumps. Tell him it’s like those organic things. Hearts or lungs or some such? Maybe he’ll understand that better.’

‘Some sort of organ, Triskellian. We need you to massage it, or whatever one does with organs. Such inconvenient things. We’re glad we’ve had most

of them taken out, aren't we?'

'Indubitably, Fabricator General.'

'What is it,' Triskellian interrupted, 'that you wish me to *do*, Fabricator General?' Because this sort of thing could go on for a while.

'Oh, well, the entertainment, obviously,' Burzulem told him airily. 'And to welcome the returning skitarii. Our gallant heroes, come home to collect their new recruits. They must be properly received while we make our offerings. Let us have a plan and schedule, won't you? We hereby delegate you Chief Festiviator, Visceral. Really, it's an honour. A job where you can keep your hands clean. You should be grateful. Speaking of hands, how's the new one turning out? Surprised you've still got a flesh one left, really, now you've tried the alternative.'

And here was a servitor proffering a grand scroll of small but time-eating tasks, all apparently the duties of the newly appointed Chief Festiviator. A month of trivialities to be accomplished in days.

'Fabricator General,' Triskellian ground out. 'I am the senior magos biologis on Morod. I am more than qualified to act as locum for this entire world.' *I should have been Fabricator General, not you.* 'I have contributions to make to the collected knowledge of our order. And you give me *this*?'

Burzulem rotated until he was facing Triskellian. 'Alloy,' he said lightly. 'Visceral thinks he's too good for us.'

Alloysia clicked her tongue ringingly against the tungsten roof of her mouth and replaced the robot's hand. The towering metal form took a step forwards, putting Triskellian in its shadow.

'We don't *want* your knowledge. It's unclean. It seeps organic juices and breeds maggots,' Burzulem told him. 'I would have all you flesh-prodders off my world if I could. Contributions, you say? What have you ever done except dabbled your fingers in corpses?'

Stiff with dignity, Triskellian allowed himself a calming breath before replying. 'I refer the Fabricator General to my past submissions to the archives, both the medical and immunological lore I have recovered and translated, and my own treatises on how our current knowledge might be furthered. I have filed no fewer than nineteen proposals for research ventures. I have myself developed a novel suppressant gel that permits nine point two per cent improved annealing between biological and mechanical

tissues. All these developments are doubtless even now making the Imperium a more ordered and efficient place—'

'No one cares,' Burzulem cut him off, waving it all away and burlesquing boredom. 'Visceral, do you honestly think I ever sent any of that *on*? Mars doesn't want your squishing and your fluids. They want the purity of steel. And, from us, they want our ore and our components, nothing more.'

Triskellian's prosthetic hand spasmed and tore a gash in his robe. He kept his face entirely still. 'You didn't... send...? Anything I submitted for the Martian Archives, you didn't even *send*?'

'And yet the Imperium somehow survives,' Burzulem remarked drily. 'It's almost as if it really wasn't that interesting after all, don't you think, Alloy?'

'That's... my life's work,' Triskellian choked.

'Oh. Really? My, that is rather depressing, don't you think? Claiming that miserable little heap of intestines as your life's work. And you think you're fit to be my *locum* rather than dear Alloy here? And take over from me, in time, and turn Morod into a charnel house? You should be doubly grateful I've made you Chief Festivator. Otherwise, what in the world would you even have to show for all that time?'

Incredibly, Triskellian managed to bow quite politely, to turn and stride from the Fabricator's presence, to walk smartly back towards his own chambers, and all without letting out the incandescent rage that was seething inside.

Before it had been gifted to the Mechanicus for use as a forge world, Morod had been just a mining planet labouring within the human Imperium. It had always been a hard place to live, but the miners had done their best, and grown their own rituals. The Emperor's ships had come on their regular round, seeking Morod's stockpiled mineral wealth, and to coincide with the event they had held a ceremony to commemorate all their many dead, and to give the bodies of the recently deceased into their furnaces. It had been a way of coping with the appalling conditions of the world they had been born to. Ascension Day: the metal lifting off into the sky to be turned into the armour and weapons of the Emperor's troops, the smoke rising from the fires to follow them, as though the dead who had also served the Imperium were being taken to their own reward.

When the Mechanicus had come and reshaped the world and its society for their own purposes, Ascension Day had persisted. The great interlocking puzzle that was the priesthood's calendar could always accommodate a new component. The ships still came for their due, after all – the great liners were in orbit even now – and with them came transports to take away the young and the strong for the Emperor or for the forge-lords. No difference between the flesh-and-blood tithe and the mineral one; everything was just fuel for the great engine that was the Imperium, and every world must contribute.

And all I ever wanted to do was contribute! Triskellian told himself furiously. And he had! Discoveries and resurrections and innovations, all laid before the feet of his superiors and... cast away. Thrown into the recycling vats the moment his back was turned. All this time he'd at least hoped his words might find an audience on Mars or elsewhere eventually. That, even strangled and stamped down on Morod, he might yet have a legacy in the wider Imperium. But Burzulem had killed that hope each day Triskellian had stood before him, and he hadn't even *known*. How the man must have laughed, every time, as he threw Triskellian's latest work onto the fire.

And Triskellian was on the brink of something, he knew. And that *something* was terrible in its implications, but it was an opportunity, too. If only he was permitted to pursue knowledge and to communicate it, free of Burzulem's stifling shadow. He would rather have found some clean solution that had no whiff of the xenos to it, but this was what chance had dealt him. He could either explore this unexpected avenue of research or consign himself to the refuse of history.

Chief Festiviator. A nonsense title. A court fool for Burzulem's pleasure, giving him trivial bean-counting tasks so that he could be publicly criticised for not performing them perfectly. Triskellian's living heart and lungs and innards felt locked in a cold fist of rage at the indignity. *I have important work to be getting on with.* And he had to advance that work quickly, because he couldn't exactly hold on to his prisoners forever.

He met with a delegation of skitarii from the ships above, the sons and daughters of Morod come home at last. *How many years later?* Travel through the warp was unreliable at best. This squad could have been from a

century ago, or from only twenty years, without anyone realising the drift in time. And, because the universe was vast and the Imperium was ordered by a thousand routines and rituals, it didn't really matter which conscription pool had first taken up these particular children of Morod for modification. When Triskellian connected to their alpha, their internal architecture was all compatible with his instruction.

'Designation,' he snapped at their leader, and the man stepped forward and genuflected with crisp precision.

'Alpha Primus Ten-Tangram, adept.' A veteran of many worlds, Triskellian supposed, cybernetics showing signs of repair under adverse conditions. He was momentarily fascinated to compare and contrast the internal structure of the whole detachment's decision trees and command architecture, which had shifted and streamlined itself under battlefield conditions. Pit Ten-Tangram's force here against three times as many of Morod's groundbound regulars and he would destroy them with brutal efficiency. The very thought was almost enough for Triskellian to schedule a test of it, just for the data that might result.

Except I have these clownish duties eating up my time. Another stab of anger, and something must have leaked through the diagnostic link because Ten-Tangram asked, 'Adept?'

Triskellian stared at him and his cohort for a long time, their metal parts polished to a gleam, their robes newly woven by the auto-looms, carbines slanted across steel shoulders. Their internal systems lay open for inloading whatever instructions he wished.

Burzulem wanted them at the feast, wanted the flames from the burning offerings reflected in the lenses of their eyes. And the Fabricator General would eat and smirk with his favourites. And he'd go on short-changing the universe, spending Morod's wealth like water for his loathsome *art*. He'd go on standing between truly observant priests and their full potential. Nothing would ever change. Gammat Triskellian would become no more than a footnote in the annals of an inefficient world, his *genius* wasted. *And I could have been Fabricator General. I have the seniority. If not for him, what wonders might we have already unearthed?*

Without giving himself time to regret, Triskellian queued commands within his mind. Nothing actionable, nothing treasonous. Unorthodox, perhaps, but within tolerance. Just another wobbly cog in the creaking

edifice of Morod. Establishing a new hierarchy for the returning skitarii so that all commands passed through one Gammat Triskellian. Sole gatekeeper for their thoughts and actions.

After all, am I not the Chief Festivator? he thought bleakly.

And he did nothing with it, not yet. It was all just *What if*, and he didn't need to fret about the implications of what he'd put into place. Not until he finally took an irrevocable step, and used it.

After that, he went to further interrogate Doctor Tesling. The man's useful lifespan was shortening like a fuse, and Triskellian wanted results. Because he was increasingly convinced there were results to be had.

The little medicae cringed satisfactorily when he re-entered. Claven and Herma had him scribbling away, defacing a pristine scroll with his scrawl of a hand. Triskellian strode over and tore the most recent writing from under the man's pen. 'What even is this?'

'We have him reporting on the methodology used in his laboratory.' Claven limped up, Herma rattling along behind him.

'It was not,' Tesling said quietly, 'a laboratory. It was my clinic. I helped people. I made them well.'

'And this monster is *well*, is he?' Triskellian placed a hand on the armaglass and met the baleful three-eyed stare of the thing within. He was aware of the little clerk watching him from the smaller jar they'd hauled in for her. She was practically human, though, and didn't interest him as much.

'He would have died,' Tesling insisted. 'I have saved him.'

'You have damned him,' Herma declared sanctimoniously, and then, 'but there may be something to be derived from your method. The flesh thus treated shows a remarkable resilience.' She prodded Claven with a crackle and he unravelled another scroll, his own results from samples torn and carved from the monster's flesh, subjected to every manner of stress and damage. And that was what interested Triskellian.

What was it that limited the legions of the Adeptus Mechanicus, that prevented them from triumphing against any odds? Burzulem would say it was the flesh, and in this Triskellian would actually agree. The flesh that could not be excised. The living parts that remained, even in the skitarii, when everything else had been cored out and scoured away. Better mechanics would not make a better soldier or a wiser priest, because the

chain was at the mercy of its weakest link. The flesh that could not be replaced must be rendered less vulnerable. And if there was ever a world to serve as a laboratory for that experiment it was Morod. There were a thousand poisons in the soil and rock of this planet that the miners constantly inhaled and ingested. And still they mined, because the same elements that killed were the most valuable for the adepts and the Imperium. Morod was a forge world in more ways than one. It was the hammer and the anvil that human flesh was beaten on.

‘What was your recovery rate? Not for aberrations like this, but for your regular subjects?’ Triskellian asked idly.

‘Patients,’ Tesling muttered. ‘They were *patients*,’ and then Triskellian’s steel hand cuffed him and he cringed. ‘At least four out of ten lived, after being brought to me.’

For tech-priest surgery the survival rate was dismal, but it was likely ten times what the average labourer on Morod might expect. ‘And these were your... kin.’

‘My siblings, adept. My people.’ The invasive surgeries Tesling’s records attested to should have left his victims bleeding out on the table or needing the sort of prosthetics the tech-priests reserved for their own. And yet many of them lived, and Triskellian knew why. His *patients* weren’t human – something he was unwilling to say out loud even here, hedging it about with words like *atypical* and *anomalous*. Yet the conclusion was inescapable: an alien taint had infiltrated Morod and spread, undetected, until its most recent scions were human enough to get work as clerks at the Palatium. And Triskellian should have gone running to Burzulem with that news and then organised an incendiary strike to obliterate seven districts of the South Chasm down to the deep bedrock. Except that he knew Burzulem would mock him for the news, and give him no credit for his vigilance. Except that he had pored over Tesling’s *results*. The strength of the flesh.

And it was alien flesh, but it was human flesh too. These were no brute orks made of deviant vegetal matter, utterly inimical to human biology. This was a strain of the xenos that could inveigle its way into human cells and form an uneasy truce between the familiar and the strange. A compatibility against all logic, that produced an end result with the virtues of both. And Triskellian had recoiled from the thought – *impurity of impurities!* – but he had not consigned Tesling to the fire.

And now he looked over Tesling's scrawlings, the man's understanding of his own craft, and almost despaired. 'How do you *know* what treatments to give? You must have a better grasp of how the atypical elements respond to these chemicals. Your own results speak to that. And yet this... this is gibberish.' Reading over the man's desperate scratchings of dosage and ministration, he felt all the frustration of his earlier interview wash over him and pincered Tesling's shoulder hard with his metal fingers. 'Tell me how you know what to do.'

The medicae let out a choked sound of pain. 'It speaks to me,' he got out. 'Then I know what to give them, to save them.'

'What speaks to you?' Triskellian demanded, looking at Claven and Herma for support.

'The *us* in *them*,' Tesling gasped, 'speaks to the *us* in *me*, and we know each other, and I know how strong they are and how much to give them.'

'Not good enough,' Triskellian snapped. Because that was no use to him. He didn't want this alien flesh giving commands. He needed it obedient, predictable, pinned down in numbers and calculations and replicable results. *We will tame it, like a beast*. Like some sweating alien draft animal, co-opted to draw the ordnance of the Astra Militarum, save that it would be enslaved within human cells. Claven's initial tests already showed the hybrid flesh was resistant to the toxins and radiation of Morod. Triskellian's own experiments suggested that it might be far more able to keep up with skitarii cybernetics, a stronger link in that chain. And Triskellian believed in the strength of human purity. He sang along to the Imperial creed, that humanity was superior and the xenos was weak and deviant and fit to be purged. But if humanity was superior and the xenos was weak, then there should only be one outcome when they met and grappled within a human cell.

'It will speak when it is spoken to,' he told Tesling. 'It will render up its information to our instruments, not to this thing within you. Or you are no use to us, you understand? You will make this resilience in your flesh obedient.'

'You do not understand what we are.' There was a flash of spirit in Tesling's eyes, as though the alien thing within him rose momentarily to the surface.

'I have read sufficient texts to know you,' Triskellian told him derisively.

In truth those old scrolls he had been able to find were incomplete and had precious little to say. Certainly his order had encountered infections such as this in the past, written of in veiled terms and maddening allusions. They had always sought to exterminate it, by those records, even down to salting the earth of whole continents on some worlds. *Blind*, Triskellian decided bitterly. *As devoid of vision as Burzulem*. 'You are merely human stock adulterated by some alien bacillus or parasite. The taint within you will work for the human cells it inhabits just as your bodies are set to work for our greater purpose. Or they will be purged. As without, so within.'

He suppressed a shudder of revulsion, telling himself, *This could be the greatest advance of the age*. And in his mind, always, Burzulem chuckling and bobbing and denying him a chance to be the visionary he knew he should be. A bleak hand settled on his heart, a pain so physical and immediate he wished he'd had the organ cut out and replaced long before.

It wouldn't matter. All the advantage he could wring from this discovery, everything he was risking his very soul to uncover, it would be wasted. It would be ground beneath Burzulem's many iron feet. Triskellian was on the brink of a discovery that might give the soldiers of the tech-priests the keys to conquer and perfect the universe, and to Burzulem it would just be 'soft sciences' and he would bury it.

Burzulem wastes my potential, he thought. *He denies me a chance to worship the Ommissiah the only proper way*. Through knowledge that the Fabricator General would scorn.

He is the misaligned component in Morod's machine. Without him, everything would run so smoothly.

And with that, he understood the use he could put that prying little clerk to.

6

Davien had been in a jar for three days. By her reckoning, another two and she'd either miss Ascension Day or find herself as one of the central components of the tech-priests' revelries. The one benefit was she had a good view of Doctor Tesling as he worked on her brother under the supervision of the two conjoined lackeys. Niem seemed in less pain, and he had bulked out even more under the doctor's ministrations. Doctor Tesling had not only saved him, but exalted him. Niem was swollen so vast with muscle and plates of dermal armour that he would only just fit through the door of these rooms. Not that he would have the opportunity given they were all captives of the tech-priest.

And here he was, returned, sweeping into his rooms with a handful of skitarii at his back. A terse command to his subordinates and the winch was descending into the mouth of her jar. She'd tried to get Doctor Tesling to operate it while the priest was away, but the man seemed utterly whipped, terrified of offending their brutal captor. Now she considered refusing to step into the hoist, but something of Tesling's timorousness had touched her. And besides, once out of the glass prison, who knew what she might accomplish?

Or who knew what fate the man intended for her? Perhaps this was a prelude to her execution.

Except, apparently, it was lunch.

She'd eaten nothing, in her three days. The jar had a pipe for tepid, metallic-tasting water and another for biological necessities – she was surprised the priests had even thought of that – but nothing else. Now the priest had perched himself on a high stool, and one of his skitarii threw a

handful of sealed packages at her feet. Rations, like the miners got. She tore into one hungrily, took a bite and then watched the priest warily as she chewed.

‘My name is Gammat Triskellian, magos biologis of the Genetor order. You may address me as adept. I assume they gave you a name, or some designation.’

‘Davien. Adept.’ She’d started at the titles. Back home she had knelt before the Congregation’s own *magus*, Claress, and she’d heard Tesling referred to as a *biophagus*. *They steal our names and twist them*, she thought, but right now, hungry and a prisoner and locked away down here, she couldn’t avoid the unhappy thought that perhaps the theft had gone the other way.

‘Davien.’ Triskellian loomed over her as she ate. ‘You are a remarkable little monster. Perhaps not so remarkable as that thing, your brother.’ A nod to the bell jar cell, where Niem’s broadened face was pressed against the glass to watch. ‘You belong to a... subset of Morod’s population. You’re the relic of an invasion from generations ago. Probably your monstrous progenitors wanted you to take over this world for their own appetites, hmm?’ He smiled unpleasantly. ‘But that hasn’t happened, has it? The attempt by your assassin on our Fabricator General was sheer desperation. And it failed.’ He lifted one hand, the metal one. ‘Which seems ironic, given where we are now. If only I’d been a step further back from Burzulem, how different things might have been.’

Davien blinked at him, not following but awaiting any opportunity his words flung her way.

‘You know, obviously, that everything done by our priesthood is to advance the perfection of the universe, towards a more efficient cosmos and the perfection of humankind.’ He rattled the words off almost blandly and smiled at her reflexive scowl. ‘Oh, you don’t believe? Well, being what you are, I can understand that. I could go to the Fabricator General right now and tell him what I’ve uncovered in the South Chasm, and he’d tell me to root you all out, bring you in to be purified at our feast, or just incinerate you in your holes. That’s the fate your little strain of abomination has earned, under Burzulem. He would see you as... needlessly organic.’ Davien could only stare blankly and wait.

‘But I,’ he went on, ‘am a more benign director, or would be, had I the

chance to direct. I am sure that, in your own mind, you wish to serve the Emperor and humanity. And all things can be made to serve. In serving, they become a part of the greater machine, and as the machine progresses forwards, so they move with it, rather than being ground between its gears. There is a way for your little rat's nest to become more than a charred spot in the histories, little Davien. There is a way for you to serve.'

'And what if we don't *want* to serve?' she demanded. There was a moment of shocked silence. She wasn't sure where it had come from. She was a prisoner of the Hollow Men, those who used people up and then cast them aside. Her place, in his world, was to obey. Yet she felt a surge of defiance pulsing in time to her heartbeat, waiting for the skitarii to step in and strike her.

Triskellian laughed like the rattle of broken things. 'Everything serves,' he told her. 'Either as a component, or as fuel. Your fellows, taken in the streets of South Chasm, they will be fuel. Their purification will feed the belief and understanding of the faithful. They will be a salutary lesson. Or that is what Burzulem would make of them. If I were able to make the decision, I might rule differently. I might instead find a way to incorporate their virtues into the machine. Your family is an atavism, Davien. Once, it might have been a threat to the purity of this world. But how many generations have you malingered here, unseen and useless, like a vestigial organ? If there was ever a moment for you to accomplish the will of your monstrous progenitors, it is long past. Now you are an equation with only two possible solutions: service or extinction. And *you* are in a position to help choose which.'

Davien was aware of Tesling hovering between them and Niem, pallid hands clasped before him. She glanced his way, then snapped her eyes guiltily back to Triskellian.

'Go on,' the tech-priest invited. 'Speak to your physician. He knows.'

'Doctor...?' Davien whispered. For Tesling was one of the elders, a man high in the ranks of the Congregation. Surely he would resist any inducement to cooperate with the hated Taskmasters.

But the doctor just hunched his shoulders, his lined face drawn tight with worry. 'He will burn us,' Tesling whispered. 'We hid for so long. We struggled on in the shadows. But now he has seen us and knows us. My child, you must...' Here, in Triskellian's chambers, he looked small and

weak and old.

‘Must what?’ Davien demanded, of him, of the tech-priest. She saw Niem staring at her mutely, a jolt of sibling empathy she took strength from. ‘What is it you want, Taskmaster?’

The insult glanced off him without leaving a mark. ‘I? Why, Davien, I want to meet your family. I want you to take me to your misbegotten people so that I might have an audience with your elders.’

He didn’t bind her hands. That omission was the greatest blow. Other than acting as a native guide to the claves of the South Chasm, Davien didn’t matter. Nothing she could do would be a threat to Gammat Triskellian. And of course he had a squad of skitarii at his back, keeping their machine visages turned towards the looming tenements on either side, but Triskellian just strode on as though he owned everything he surveyed.

And soon enough they were in her familiar haunts. At first it was just one or two homes in buildings where the Congregation had established themselves, made converts and set up hidden chapels. Then she was stumbling over the rubble of the conscription pool’s passing, knowing that whole floors and wings of the faithful had been hollowed out by Triskellian and his troops a few days before. And, just one street further on...

She stopped. The feeling of betrayal was too great. Any further and she’d be in sight of where Tesling’s clinic had been. She’d be looking up at the broken walls of the building she’d been born in, where the Congregation had its heart. Magus Claress lived there, and there were covens of the elder generation, her Aunts and Uncles and Great-Aunts and even older than that. Those closer to the stars than she was, kin to the angels who would – yes, she still believed! – come some day soon to save them all. To embrace their poor faithful in the divine Union she had always been promised.

‘What are you waiting for?’ Triskellian asked. And then one of the skitarii leant in and made a buzzing report she couldn’t follow, and the tech-priest said, ‘We’re being watched. By your kin, no doubt. Call to them. Let them know what they must do.’

And she couldn’t. She just hung her head, weighed down with the shame of being here in this company. No matter, though. There were already people emerging – her own people, or they had been before now. She saw faces at windows, bodies crowding doorways or creeping out over the

rubble where their homes had been. Human faces, and faces that were more than human. The Aunts and Uncles were out in the open for the first time, hunched in robes and rags that barely hid the divinity of their shapes. A crowd was gathering, and the skitarii shifted nervously. She saw hammers and lascutters, wrenches and knives, and there were the simple pistols and shotguns they made in the factories while the overseers' backs were turned. Enough to kill one tech-priest and his escort, and to obliterate the stain on their family that Davien had become. Had it been just her, then so be it, but Tesling and Niem would die if anything happened to Triskellian. She had to play her part for them.

And Triskellian was just facing them all down, nothing in him but that superior confidence the tech-priests all had. As if their mechanical augmentations placed them above mere humanity. The Congregation all knew that it was the flesh, not the steel, that served as a bridge to the divine.

He gave her a shove and she stumbled forwards, towards the hungry crowd. She could see them working themselves up to punish this intrusion, and she had to reach them before their mood broke. Holding her hands up, Davien picked her way over the broken plascrete and fallen stones.

'I need to speak to the elders!' Her thin, high voice rose over all the rumbles of their discontent.

A figure lurched forwards from the ranks: Uncle Eddarc, though his expression admitted no kinship with her right then. His yellow eyes bored into her, set into the purplish white of his stretched face. He was stooped, supporting himself on two twisted bare feet and the claw-hand of his extra arm. More than half angel, was Uncle Eddarc.

'Please,' Davien told him. 'Doctor Tesling's still alive. Niem's alive. *Sakiri's* alive, even. Please, they'll all die unless I can speak to the elders.'

Eddarc's thin lips twisted, showing ranks of dagger teeth. A moment later he lunged forwards and seized her arm with his talons. His face showed nothing but disappointment, which hurt more than claw or fang would.

'Don't fight them!' she called to the mob, as she was hauled off. 'Please! We'll all burn if you fight!' and then she was inside the tenement, dragged past the reach of the sun, down into the buried chambers. These were hallowed spaces, but right now she was here as an enemy to be judged, rather than one of the faithful being rewarded. She felt filthy, stained with machine oil and engine grease, unworthy. *Traitor*, whispered the voices of

the elders, and she knew they were right.

And at last Uncle Eddarc cast her down onto the cracked stone floor of a cellar, jarring her knees as she crouched in supplication. She looked up, and there they were, the elders.

They clung to the walls around her, and to each other, and even to the ceiling, hooked there by their talons. They were the older generations, the ones who had to remain hidden because there was no disguising them. The angel blood in them overwhelmed the human. They had carapace for skin, purplish black or bluish. Three, sometimes four arms; a knot of curved claws for a hand, a long head with blazing amber eyes and a corrugated ripple of scales decorating the brow. She had thought, when she was very young, that it marked where the finger of the true Emperor had touched them, to impart such divinity. They swayed and clung and rustled and loured down at her, and she shrank back before them. They were too beautiful. She was no longer worthy even to prostrate herself before them.

‘Elders,’ she got out. ‘Uncles, Aunts. Forgive me. I had no choice.’

‘She has betrayed us,’ Uncle Eddarc called out. ‘She has brought a Hollow Man here. He *knows*. She has spoken our secret names to outsiders.’

‘No!’ Davien protested. ‘I’ve told nothing! But yes, he knows. He has Doctor Tesling. He has my brother. He’s done *tests*. He put our blood into machines. He’ll burn us unless he can speak to you. He wants...’ She didn’t truly know what Triskellian wanted. ‘He wants to make a deal.’ She hoped that was true.

‘Tear her!’ one of the Aunts demanded. ‘Devour her!’

Davien bowed her head, knowing it was no more than she deserved. Hoping that her betrayal wouldn’t taste like poison to them. Tears were running down her cheeks. *I only wanted to save Niem.*

But then another voice, deeper, from the shadowy recesses. One of the Great-Aunts, bulk far greater than a human, looming with the authority of the eldest generations. Perhaps a direct child of the very angels themselves. ‘Send Claress. Send our magus.’ And other whispering voices, overlapping with it: *It is too near the time. We cannot risk it. The fires will come. We are so close...* The fretful rustlings of the elders, who had waited innumerable decades for a half-remembered promise, and were now faced with the ruin of everything they held dear.

And then the Great-Aunt, hunching close, towering over Davien’s

prostrate form. A hooked claw rested on her shoulder, not to rend, but a gentle act of communion.

‘Go with our magus. Our time is very close, little one. You have done wrong, but you may yet make amends and receive the reward of the faithful. Now go.’

OceanofPDF.com

7

Triskellian had spent half the previous night with the probability engines, entering his parameters and reading over their predictions. He had begged, borrowed and promised, even threatened the more junior of his siblings in order to monopolise the great creaking banks of gears. He had raised the spectre of his new mock-title, the Chief Festiviator, and lied that it was the Fabricator General's business he was on, when it was anything but.

He had been concerned solely with prognostication. He was on the brink of doing a great and terrible thing, and he needed the engines to guide his hand.

Burzulem was not liked, after all. Triskellian wasn't the only tech-priest repeatedly passed over. If he simply stood and declared his public opposition, who would flock to his banner?

Almost nobody. Not even a question he needed to formulate for the engines. The hierarchy of the Adeptus Mechanicus was a machine of slow and badly oiled parts, and set on rails. To change its course took more than merely waving a flag and a petition.

And yet, following his most recent audience with the despised Fabricator General, he knew he could not live another month in Burzulem's shadow. No more simpering mockery, no more wasting good resources and research, no more *art*. Morod should be a jewel in the order's crown, and Triskellian's name should be praised from here to Mars as a paragon of incisive thought. *And I should have been Fabricator General anyway. All those years ago it should have been me.* The algorithm had been biased when it selected a new leader. That was the only conceivable conclusion. No properly calibrated procedure could have selected Burzulem over him.

Some clerk inputting flawed data, some faltering cog. Or else he cheated, somehow.

Too many years, though, to simply pull on a thread and unravel events back to that time. Action was needed. So he had run the numbers again, inputting the precise numerical values of his treasons and hauling on the levers to set the engines into motion.

Should it come to a direct confrontation between Burzulem and myself...? He had skitarii divisions allocated to him for this task, those whose command chains still ran through him, and would obey him without question. He was supposed to have reset them, of course, when those jobs had been completed, but somehow he'd never got round to it. With each demeaning burden Burzulem had loaded onto him, a certain amount of military force had stuck to Triskellian's hands. And of course he'd never considered *using* it. But there had always been the thought, *What if I can catch the bloated bell in some actual heresy? What if his wretched art can be mathematically proved to be deleterious to our moral health? Could I triumph against him and save Morod for reason and science?*

And yet it was not enough. His personal resources were too few, and the priesthood of Morod too pedestrian and conservative. The shock of dissent amongst the ranks would galvanise the rest against him. Even if he triumphed by force they would reject him. He would be alone, and doomed.

He already had a sense of where he would go, eventually, but he was a diligent researcher. He exhausted all other options first. There were, of course, the Ascension Day returnees. He had been moving skitarii down from the ships for the last few days, amassing a respectable force of battle-hardened veterans. Burzulem had, unwittingly, given them into his hands, and Triskellian had inloaded precise command hierarchies into their minds, where all roads led to Gammat Triskellian. Would they follow him in rebellion against the Fabricator General? Yes, the engines placidly computed. Would it be enough to carry the day and seize the Palatium?

The percentages wavered about the fifty-fifty mark, murky with unknowable factors. If the main body of the priesthood stood by, then yes; if they rallied to Burzulem's defence, no. And, however things turned out, that meant far too much fighting within sacred walls; too much collateral damage, priceless machines damaged that could likely never be repaired. The cost was too high. And, if he left matters until after the grand

distraction of Ascension Day, the odds fell further as normal routines reasserted themselves. His moment would be lost. He must act now or accept a future as nothing save the butt of Burzulem's humours.

And so, in the small hours of the night, Triskellian stood before the probability engines, hearing the scuff of novices hurrying to their late devotions. He sought within himself for the routines and rituals of worship that would bring peace to his mind, and they were absent. In running these programs and predictions he had committed himself to the act.

Which left one final series of numbers to feed into the machines.

'What if...?'

The girl brought him within the walls of their filthy tenement, down through the cellars of cellars. They emerged into a crumbling buried chamber that stank of unwashed bodies. The walls were decorated with sacred art, as though this were just some local chapel where real worship might take place. Triskellian wasn't fooled. He knew the signs by now. The figure of the Emperor carved into the wall and worn smooth by generations of adoring hands was subtly unorthodox. He understood the secret meaning in those multiple hands and that artlessly elongated head. *Their Emperor, not mine.*

His skitarii stood to the alert, because this was the pivot point of his plan, the moment he risked his own flesh for the sake of his future. If these tainted things were simply fanatics enslaved to the service of their xenos blood, then likely he'd have to fight his way out over a pile of dead bodies. Except his plan would be dead then, too, and perhaps he'd rather let himself be torn apart by monsters than go back and bow and scrape before Burzulem.

When their delegation came out, they were a sorry lot. He almost mocked himself for fearing them. Except he remembered when he had been here with the conscription pool, and how quickly their mob had assembled. *They play at weakness*, he thought. *Although they are also weak, in other ways.*

Their leader was a haggard old crone, bald and wrinkled and almost human-looking. Her ridged forehead might plausibly have been the mark of some disease, her eyes just yellow from age. Two attendants helped lower her down to kneel on the floor, but Triskellian reckoned there was at least a little mummery in the frailty of her movements. *Not quite the doddering old*

grandmother you make yourself out to be. Those attendants were more of an obvious threat: burly, hunched figures swathed in robes. Their hands, emerging from wide sleeves, were chitinous and claw-nailed. Their hoods sloped over long, misshapen heads. Exactly what the old texts had led him to expect, in short.

Behind them, a handful of others shambled in, some human, some less so. A few were hidden within robes but most simply wore the hard-wearing clothes of factorum workers or miners: faded orange overalls, black rubber gloves, blue-grey plastic pads, tools that could quickly become weapons.

‘Let us have one thing clear between us,’ he said flatly. ‘In the Palatium Lucidium, amongst my dispatches for this morning, is an order to turn this whole district to ash. There are dragoons and pteraxii ready to be set in motion to scour this whole spur of Auctorites down to the rock. On my return, I will abstract that scroll from the others before they go to be executed.’ They were such a miserable-looking lot he wondered if such precautions were even necessary. A bitter blow if their strain was already atrophied to uselessness. But then all he needed them to be was a *credible* threat for just long enough.

‘What do you call yourselves?’ he demanded. ‘The Congregation of the Blessed Union, do I have that right?’ He’d browbeaten the girl into telling him.

‘We are merely poor servants of the Emperor,’ the woman whispered. ‘I am Claress. I guide these poor penitents—’

‘You can spare your wind. I know what you are. Or rather, what you *were*. You are the echo of a xenos intruder that came to Morod generations ago, and infected people here with its blood, and its thoughts. You are the last vestiges of the taint it spread, covered over with a skin of Imperial doctrine.’ He gave his broken-gear chuckle at her look of outrage. ‘I am high in the ranks of the Adeptus Mechanicus, woman. Do you think we know *nothing*? And yet, where are your monstrous overlords? Were they lost to the warp, do you think? Or were they never there? I can only picture your progenitor, poor lonely monster that it was, creeping out at night to stare up at the stars and pine, before crawling into the dark and teaching its brood its lies.’

She hissed at him, and he thought he might have pushed her too far, but she was old and beaten; he read it in every line of her. A life stretched

beyond the dreams of most on Morod, and every year of it lived in the shadow of disappointment.

‘Your assassin did almost kill the Fabricator General,’ he noted. ‘Came perilously close, in fact.’ *If only I hadn’t hauled the bastard down.* ‘I imagine you would have tried to rise up, right then? Swarm out of your cellars and culverts waving the tatty little banners of your cult. And I’ve seen you can throng the streets as well as any mob. However empty your creed is on this world, you’ve plainly spread it far and wide through the meaner districts of the city. And you’d have been crushed, of course. The Adeptus Mechanicus is not some beast that dies when you remove its head. We are a machine where every component is infinitely replaceable.’ And now who was it, mouthing a false doctrine? The Palatium was filled with engines that nobody understood, and so much of his fellow tech-priests’ routine was merely throwing levers that connected to nothing or consulting dials that never moved. No point revealing that to this withered hag, though.

‘And yet you’re here,’ Claress told him, in the hush of his musing. ‘And not with fire. You have discovered us, and yet you’re here. Why, adept?’

‘Why?’ He tried for a magnanimous smile and felt the skin about his artificial eyes stretch painfully. ‘I am the bearer of good news, Claress. I am come to tell you that your time *is* come. Ascension Day is your day too. No matter your overlords from the stars will never arrive to exalt you.’

‘So that you may destroy us for your sport,’ Claress mumbled.

‘I can do that, rise up or no,’ Triskellian pointed out. ‘But I have a purpose for you, magus. You and your rabble of followers. I want you out there, breaking things and making noise. Rise up, and then slink back to your haunts when the day is done. When you’ve caused enough chaos and distraction.’

‘We are not your toys,’ Davien broke in, apparently unable to hold her peace before her betters. ‘We are the Congregation of the Blessed Union and our day *will* come! The Emperor’s beauteous angels will come to us, and it is we who will ascend to become one with them! We are not a plaything of the Taskmasters!’

‘You are what I say you are, or you are nothing,’ Triskellian told them both flatly. ‘You will perform when I tell you to perform, or you are ash, and all your children and grandchildren and all the doddering monsters you doubtless hide away. Because through *me* is your salvation. Not your

monster-Emperor, not your absent star-angels. *Me*. For I have looked upon your genetic code and seen virtue within it. I have deemed something of you worthy to survive. Only through me will your inheritance receive eternal life. How's that for a new creed and prophecy? Obey me, and I shall leave room in this world for something of you to survive. Defy me, and you shall be obliterated so that not even the memory of you remains. On Ascension Day you shall rise up and throng the streets, and this world will see a great change. One shall come to power who will shepherd in an age of enlightenment and knowledge and virtuous experimentation. The wasteful and inefficient will be cast down. True science shall be enthroned at the heart of our world again.' He let the messianic phrases roll off his tongue, feeling a little drunk with the power of them. *I see now how easily cults like these can spread, and why a man might want to be master of them.* And he saw the crone hating him, loathing him with every fibre of her being, and yet fearing him, too. He had power of life or death over her.

When she nodded her head in submission, he felt a moment of utter epiphany, a revelation of his own great future stretching ahead of him. Fabricator General Triskellian, forge-lord of Morod, paragon of adepts, his words copied and recopied across the Imperium.

'Only through me,' he reminded them, 'shall you live. Now, prepare your people for the blessed day. Tell them their moment is at hand, the one you've so often preached of.'

On his way back to the Palatium, Triskellian had to medicate himself several times to flatten his emotions. For all that flesh was his speciality, he recognised its excesses must be kept in line. Clinically, he catalogued his various species of sensation. Elation, he knew, because the degenerates would do what he needed them to do. And, running underneath it all, a little current of fear. Perhaps tomorrow would see no more than a feeble mutter of complaint from the South Chasm districts, and the Fabricator General wouldn't even pause in his festivities.

The emotion was right and proper, he supposed. What was ever achieved, without risk? He reassured himself that he held all the cards, both against Burzulem and against the worms of the Congregation. He had run his calculations, hour upon hour of them, stacking probability as far in his favour as the circumstances permitted. And nobody need ever know. When

the dust had settled, after a truly memorable Ascension Day, he would have it all. The Congregation's sad little rebellion would expose Burzulem for the failure he was and then he, Triskellian, would swoop in and save the day. Cue acclaim and approbation from all, and a newly appointed provisional Fabricator General. Perhaps – a thrilling thought – he could even arrange things so that Burzulem got himself *killed*, if the man put himself in harm's way. Everything was in place. He had eliminated every possible chance of error. So why was he feeling so jittery?

There had been that final exchange, between him and Claress. After she had bowed her wrinkled bald head and agreed to everything, made her cult the tool of his own personal ascension, she'd looked up at him and fixed him with her yellowish eyes and said, 'But we must have our champion.'

'What champion?' he'd scoffed, thinking of the bloated monster that was Tesling's experiment.

'You know her,' the magus whispered. 'Your arm remembers her.'

And that upset him just a little, thinking back. Because how could the woman have *known* what happened in Burzulem's audience chamber? *Is she a psyker? Is that part of their xenos genetics?* He felt that he had thoroughly anatomised the alien components of his prisoners' blood. Surely he would have found some suggestion of... But then, could even a human psyker be reliably detected by such means? And anyway, a little prescience of distant things would change nothing.

'She's for execution,' he'd told the hag. 'They'll have her beneath the arena by now, with the rest of the offerings. They'll be stoking the furnace for tomorrow.' With prayers and ritual, great lines of novices swaying back and forth along the gantry to pour blessed oils and libations into the red-lit mouth so that it would consume the imperfect with holiness as well as fire.

'She is for rebellion,' Claress hissed. 'Where she goes, the Congregation will follow. They will hear her song of insurrection in their blood. We need her. You must give the girl the means to free her.' A nod at the clerk.

And he *must* give her nothing, of course. He was the master of this situation. He need not concede even the slightest gradation of advantage to his tools. Except she had looked him in the eye, and he had nodded, finding the proposal unassailable, and had given out the emergency frequencies for the glass cells.

A small thing; it would change nothing. Yet, looking back, it left a worm

of disquiet in him that, at the moment of his triumph over them, he had simply given them what they wanted, without hesitation. And what could the girl do, really? She was a nothing, the lowest of servants. But when he had told her what she needed to know, Davien's stare had not been the vacant look befitting a menial. He had an uncomfortable feeling that true fanaticism was building in that young head, more even than in the old witch.

Magnanimity, he reassured himself, and yet he remained uneasy all the way back to the Palatium.

OceanofPDF.com

8

There had been a moment, right at the end of the interview, when Davien saw something in Claress. The old woman's eyes had suddenly burned with purpose, as though a greater power had slipped into her wrinkled skin to stare out at this presumptuous cog-worshipper. She had turned on the man, made demands, and he had acquiesced with a slightly bewildered look on his face. Hope had surged in Davien's heart. *Was it all an act? Are we manipulating them?*

But then he had gone, and Claress sagged back like a structure falling in on itself. She sucked at her gums and stared at nothing, hollowed out and weary.

'Give out the word,' she whispered to the Aunt and Uncle at her shoulders. 'Tell them all that it is the Emperor's will we take up our weapons. The machine-priests' Ascension Day is to be our day, succeed or fail. Go and tell all the Congregation that we rise against them. It must be now, or it will be never.' She let herself be helped to her feet, and somewhere in the process a spine clicked into place, and her next words came out with fire.

'Tell the Aunts and the Uncles. Tell the Great-Aunts and the Great-Uncles. Summon our eldest from their nests. Pass word to every clave where the Congregation keeps a chapel. Go to all who bear our blood, and all who don't but who will hear our message. Tell the forge-tenders and the factorum stewards that we march on the Palatium tomorrow. Tell them every death between the teeth of the machines, every sibling crushed in a collapsed shaft, every child sick of their poisons will be avenged tomorrow or not at all. Have them rise with us, and tell them they will see marvels!'

And people rushed from the room to carry out her orders, even as more

came to see what the shouting was about. And Davien stood back and felt ill, because all of this was a sham, surely. It was at the prompting of one of the enslavers. They were nothing but a plaything of the tech-priests. And they were going to take up their meagre arms against the mechanised might of the adepts. The streets of Auctorites would be awash with the blood of her kin.

When all the messengers had rushed off, Davien shook her head bitterly.

‘I have brought this about,’ she managed, fighting back the urge to weep at her own weakness. ‘I wanted to save Niem. I’ve brought the end of us.’

‘Child...’ Claress said, but Davien skittered away from her, refusing to let herself be comforted.

‘This is the end of us,’ she hissed. ‘The priest will use us, and then he will destroy us. Or imprison us in his jars and make us his experiments. All our ways, our traditions, our *faith*. He will melt it out of us. There will be nothing left but his science.’

‘Child...’ Claress repeated.

‘We should flee,’ Davien almost shouted at her. ‘All of us, each to a different hole. We should abandon this city. We should carry our words and our blood to other places. We’re finished here! I’m sorry, magus, I’m sorry.’ And she was simultaneously weeping and incandescent with rage. At herself, at Triskellian, at Claress. ‘I have ruined us! I’m a traitor. Punish me, magus. Destroy me.’

‘You have listened to the lies of the enemy, it is true,’ Claress said softly. Her hand fell on Davien’s shoulder, a husk of a thing, no weight to it. ‘And you may be punished in time, that is also true. But for now, you are one of us, and you must play your part in what is to come.’

‘But it’s a sham!’ Davien exclaimed. ‘It’s some Taskmaster plan, some infighting between them. It isn’t the time!’ Struck by a sudden hope, she searched the old woman’s face. ‘Is it? Is all this... the Emperor’s plan for us? Can it be?’ And before she could hear any empty comforts, she rushed on. ‘Tell me truly, magus. Please tell me.’

The sad calm on Claress’ face was heartbreaking. ‘I don’t know, child. I wish I could give you all the grand certainties in the world. I wish I could give you the words of fire and faith I’d speak in the chapel, of the Many-Handed Emperor and His angels. But that is what faith is for, Davien.’ She sagged, sinking in on herself a little more. ‘Take me to my chamber. I must

rest before tomorrow.'

'You can't take to the streets, magus. Not you.'

'I must. We all shall play our part. We shall triumph together, or we shall fall. I do not want to be left alone if my kin are taken from me.'

Davien led her deeper into the maze of cellars. All around, the Congregation were in a frenzy of preparation. The building was haemorrhaging the faithful as they rushed out to carry the magus' words across all the poor districts of the city. Out there, all Davien's distant kin would be arming themselves. And the others, all those who weren't blood but who had suffered beneath the crushing iron boot of the tech-priests, they'd be gathering too. All of them cast against the iron walls of the Hollow Men.

When she had Claress back to the old woman's bed, she helped her lie down, hearing joints click and crack. The magus lay there, staring at the low ceiling, then shifted her head to look at the painting of the Emperor on the far wall. It was flaking now, half-obsured with grime. A depiction from the time of the Great-Aunts and Uncles, when the blood of the Emperor was stronger in them, so that none of the Congregation could show their faces for fear of being known for what they were. A figure with four arms: two human hands and two with radiant claws like crescent moons. An elliptical head split by a great benevolent smile that was all teeth. The eyes were beatific, murderous, inhuman. Davien had stared at the image often, feeling out its contradictions, letting them speak to the human and the inhuman within her. It frightened her; it inspired her.

'I hear them singing to me.' Claress' dry voice rose to her. 'The angels. They throng the cold void. And I sing back. I tell them, *We are here. We are faithful. We're waiting for you.* And their great wings carry them across the freezing spaces, through the perilous labyrinth of the warp. They are coming, Davien. They tell me, *We hear you. We come for you. Only have faith, and you shall become part of us.* The Blessed Union, child. Our destiny.' She laughed softly, coughed, shuddering with each dry convulsion. 'They came from the stars, our ancestors. The first on Morod to bear our blood was an angel's child, and so we are children of angels. But weaker, each generation. I lack the strength of the Aunts, the might of the Great-Aunts. I am too human to be truly strong. But I hear them, Davien. They are so beautiful. There is nothing on this ugly world to compare to them. I need

to see them with my own eyes, before I grow too old.'

And Davien, one of the diminished survivors of a younger generation still, thought about how thin her own blood was, how little of the angel remained. 'Do you think the priests' Ascension Day will be our ascension too? Or will all our blood just end up on the streets and in that priest's laboratory?'

Claress' yellow gaze switched to her. 'Faith is all that we have, when the machinery of this world comes to crush us. I hear the angels. They come to us, but space is vast and the warp is a trickster. All we can do is believe that the Many-Handed Emperor will not abandon His faithful in their time of need. That He is a true divinity, beyond the enthroned corpse the machine-priests worship. Our god *lives*, Davien. Our god *is* life, life in all its many forms and guises. Theirs is dust and ancient mechanisms. We *must* prevail, or we give the universe over to entropy and death. Only by our truths can life eternal survive and spread throughout the cosmos. Do you understand me, child? Do you have faith?'

And Davien thought, *We are going to die tomorrow, on the streets and in their arena. This is not the true uprising we were promised, it is some priest's gambit.* But she couldn't hold to those thoughts against the old woman's rustle of a voice. It got under her skin. It spoke to all those services in the buried chapel. It spoke to her blood.

Easy to have faith when you were strong, after all. And what was the value of it, then? But they stood under the steel hammer of the tech-priests, and they would rise up nonetheless. Let Triskellian think it was all to his plan. The Congregation would rise because it was their *time*. Who said that *he* was using *them*? And even though, intellectually, she knew the truth, she still felt that fire in her, that burned away all doubt.

'I believe, magus,' she said fiercely. 'Tell me what I must do.'

The next dawn, even as the tech-priests were attending their early Ascension Day devotions, the streets of the South Chasm districts erupted into armed uprising.

Davien saw it from the rooftops, crossing from building to building by the gantries, bridges and ropes that the skitarii periodically brought down but the locals always strung up again. All night the Congregation's messengers had been running like sparks through the poorer districts of the city, seeing

which claws would catch their fires. All of the true faithful rose up without question, of course. Right now she could only see the more inarguably human of them, those marked only by a pallidity of skin, patches of chitinous scales, unblinking yellow eyes perhaps. No unusual traits on as poisonous a world as this. Behind and within the walls of the tenements, though, the older generations of the god-touched would be stirring; would be *eager*. They had waited all their long lives, after all. They had hidden away as their younger offspring had busied themselves in the world, unable to show their distorted faces. They had known only the burning fire of their faith, and now that faith told them, *Rise!*

The streets were thronging with people, just ordinary people. And yet, not *ordinary*, for in many of those bodies a few drops of divine blood ran. But they were not the superhuman figures of Imperial myth. Not the Adeptus Astartes that had been made into little gods; not the tech-priests, elevated by machinery until they had forgotten what it was like to have two living feet on the ground. People, with nothing but their faith, and what tools and weapons they could scavenge or make themselves. And today they would attempt to wrest control of their destiny from those who had ordered and limited their whole lives.

And they would die, she knew. Heavy-hearted she watched them muster, factorum workers clapping each other on the shoulder, hard greetings called across the crowd. There were banners there, and some were of the Many-Handed Emperor Scattering His Angels Upon the Faithful, but there were others, too. Crude standards celebrating this ward or that factorum, this mining crew, even one for the staff of a workers' refectory. There was an air of festival, just as if they were celebrating the damned Ascension Day after all.

And then the first skitarii came into sight. Davien knew she should be away by now, off on the errand that Claress had given her, but she couldn't. She had to see if the whole venture would collapse into tragedy.

A wedge of red-clad cybernetic soldiers ordered itself precisely across the street ahead of the gathering mob. Behind them, a pair of dragoons stalked in, towering over the soldiers' heads. Their riders couched forked lances snapping with sparks, even as the servitor beneath them, merged with the workings of the machine, directed the Ironstrider's jerky motions. The crowd stilled, seeing all those carbines levelled at them, knowing more

would be on the way.

The skitarii alpha called out, voice amplified until it rattled Davien's skull like thunder. *'By the order of the Fabricator General, you are required to disperse. There will be no second warning.'*

And Claress stepped forwards from the ranks of the crowd, standing ahead of them, raising her staff. Somehow her high, clear voice carried even to Davien. 'Faith and freedom! Faith for the true Emperor's blood! Freedom from the yoke!'

The skitarii opened fire.

Davien screamed when they did it, curled away from the blaze and heat of it, knowing this was surely the end even as the uprising began. But in the echo of the shots she dared look, and saw Claress somehow untouched, standing with bodies to her left and right, the faithful who had put themselves in harm's way. And not so many bodies, even, not compared to the vast mass of humanity that was packing the street. Angry humanity, crammed with grievances.

Claress' voice called out again, and now she was sounding the charge. Davien saw members of the Congregation break into a run on either side of her, funnelling through the streets in a great rush, wielding hammers and prybars and power-cutters, emptying their shotguns and automatics into the skitarii wedge. The dragoons were in motion instantly, striding over the heads of their human-sized allies, accelerating into a counter-charge with lances lowered. Davien saw the first connect, its huge iron feet sending insurgents flying even as the lance swept an arc through the crowd, charring and burning. Then an eye-rending beam of light seared into it. One of the mining crews had a rock laser set up on the rooftop across from Davien and they drew lines of molten steel across the dragoon's chassis before striking something vital.

In an instant the walking machine flashed incandescently and exploded, laying waste to the nearest fighters in a horrible toll of shrapnel and shredded flesh. For everyone left standing, though, that was the signal to rush forwards. Moments later the skitarii were giving ground, shooting and falling back. Or just falling, dragged down by the crowd who saw them as nothing more than the tools of their oppressors.

And then Davien was off, roof to roof, eyes open for when the tech-priests' more subtle instruments decided the higher reaches were their

territory. There would be rangers up here sniping down at the crowd soon enough. There would be the murderous rust-stalkers trying to flank the Congregation to bring down its leaders with their blades and claws. She had to be ahead of all of that. She had work to do, a task entrusted to her by the magus herself.

She shadowed the forerunners of the mob until they exploded out before Nilhetum Square, where the rail depot was. More of the Palatium's troops were disembarking even as everyone arrived, hurriedly evacuating the train and taking up position to defend it. And if the Congregation wished to reach the Palatium, they needed to control the train line, and they needed to take it swiftly before the tech-priests began destroying their own infrastructure to deny it to the rebels.

There were more than just skitarii out there. She saw the low, trundling shapes of Kataphron servitors grinding down ramps from flatbed carriages, armoured human head, torso and arms set into a mechanised assault vehicle that was also their lower body. Davien felt a flare of rage at the tech-priests and their meddling. They took the divine flesh and carved it and pared it down, merged it with their devices. Nothing could be left alone. Nothing had any value until it was incorporated into their machines. And, on a grander scale, no individual lives had worth unless they were components of the wider priestly engine that spanned the human universe and enslaved everything it touched to their cold metal vision.

The Kataphron were terrors, nigh invulnerable to the weapons the foot-soldiers of the Congregation had brought, but by now the rioters had been given the chance to bring in their own big guns. With a choking roar and a belch of smoke one of the big quarry trucks raced out of a side street, already up to its lumbering top speed. It was a heavily armoured Goliath model, its entire front given over to rock-grinding blades that would chew hungrily on skitarii machine-flesh or the armour of the Kataphron. And, in its wake, a flurry of robed figures bearing a banner showing that familiar many-armed figure. The Aunts and the Uncles had come out from their cellars and holes, from their forgotten wall-spaces where they had waited for generations. Even as the Goliath powered forwards, meeting the lead Kataphron head-on and making a jagged mess of its armour, the elders were leaping around and over it, brandishing knives, pistols, or just their own hooked talons. And there was more. Davien felt a voice in her head, then. A

singing so pure and beautiful that she thought it must be the angels, come at last. All the Congregation must have heard it, from the way they redoubled their pace and closed joyously with the skitarii and the machines.

A great figure, head and shoulders over the rank and file, had come into the square – a Great-Aunt, one of the true elders, shrouded in streamers and rags of cloth that could not hide the divinity of her form. She sang, and the Congregation echoed her, voices upraised in prayer and praise. In one of her three hands was a banner, not the crude handmade things the crowd had spent last night creating but something ancient, preserved for this day over generations. It showed not the expected Imperial visage, but an emblem with that same long-jawed head and a trailing cog-backed body; a serpentine shape curled in upon itself, one end a hooked claw, the other hungering jaws ready to devour the tech-priests and all their works.

The skitarii turned their weapons on her, blasting away, but the banner had electrified the Congregation so that they were swarming the lines, clambering over the Kataphron, braving the massed fire of their foes. Davien saw explosives go off, mining charges devastating bodies on both sides. She saw brutal knots of knife-work and bayonets and the bludgeoning butts of carbines, no quarter given.

She saw the skitarii at the rear re-embarking on the train and knew her cue had come.

Nobody was watching for one young woman to come down off the rooftops and stow away on the train. And when she stowed away, she wore her Palatium robes and revealed her electoos, so that they accepted her as one of their own. And they were in full retreat, those who could escape the crowd packing onto the train and riding it away to deny it to the insurgents. The miners would bring their own trains from the works, and they'd repair the rails where the skitarii broke them. They were nothing if not industrious, and they'd been making and mending for generations to the Taskmasters' order. Now all that know-how would be turned against the hand that held the whip.

But by then, Davien was already speeding off towards Auctorites' central districts, towards the arena and, beyond that, the walls of the Palatium.

As far as Davien could work out, the tech-priests themselves weren't treating the uprising as serious yet. That gave her hope. There were a lot of

skitarii assembled at the arena, where the festivities were to begin, but they were at parade-ground attention, waiting to receive their master's blessing and benediction. The other troops, down from the ships, seemed to have been mostly pulled back to barracks near the Palatium, and she saw Triskellian's hand in that. He was stage-managing his little insurrection, after all. As she left the train she caught glimpses of them disembarking from the void dock, and something about them sent a shiver through her. They seemed quite different to the skitarii she was used to. War had toughened them up, scuffed the shine off their metal parts. And she knew Triskellian would be deploying them when he'd won whatever he was after with his little war game. Even compared to the tech-priests' regular toy soldiers, the returnee battalion seemed faceless and untouchable. Different. For a moment she found herself with an unaccountable desire to approach them, to test the limits of her cover identity by going to peer into their lenses and the slits of their helms. She shook it off. She had work to do.

Her electroos sufficed to get her beneath the arena. Overhead, the various sects and divisions of the Adeptus Mechanicus would be taking their places on the banked stone seating. She could hear their grating hymns, croaked out of metal throats and speakers. They were working themselves up into a clinical devotion, ready for their entertainment. Down beneath the arena floor were more of their glass cells, where all those judged unfit were being held. The injured and maimed, the sick, those born incomplete, those who couldn't work. And those touched visibly by the Many-Handed Emperor's blood, of course. All those not fit to be included in the great, endless, pointless work the tech-priests devoted their hollow lives to.

Above, in the centre of the area, they would have the furnaces ablaze, a great cauldron seething, preparing to make offerings to their own vision of god. She understood the theology all too well. Just as the fires of a smelter purified raw material, so the arena furnaces would symbolically purify the population of Morod, so it might be forged into the tools the adepts required.

But this was the one concession Claress had won from the tech-priest. The glass cells were designed with an integral flaw, so that if necessary they could be shattered. If a certain frequency sounded from their control mechanisms, they would all explode at once, the air a brief hell of razor shards.

And now Davien crept into the tunnels beneath, clambering through the spaces where ancient gears had stilled, where pistons had rusted half-closed. As the close confines shook to the detonation of the first pyrotechnics above, she squeezed her skinny frame through hatches forever open just wide enough. Until the cells were below.

Many of those caught here would never be able to fight. The conscription pool had taken in many hundreds across the city, though, and they were ordered by clave, meaning the Congregation were mostly still together. Many of them showed the marks of divinity strongly, watching the servitors and junior priests hungrily through the glass. There were more than a few claws and fangs amongst them.

And there was Sakiri, ready for her own central role in the festivities. They had her hooked to that five-limbed frame, pinned there like a specimen. Great bundles of cables ran to every part of it now, and Davien knew they would lift her up through a hatch and present her like a banner. They would run current through her until she glowed like the sun, searing her to ash even as the priests chanted and sang their soulless hymns.

Not if I can help it.

A quartet of bored junior tech-priests presided over the banks of levers and switches that governed the cells. They were playing some game together, running mathematical sequences on their steel fingers to rules opaque to Davien. Still, there were skitarii within earshot, and all her electroos and her subservient act wouldn't suffice to have them let her at the controls. A more lasting diversion would be necessary.

On the lower levels she found one of the ubiquitous steel cases the tech-priests used to carry important missives. Just a metal tube, the ornamental reliefs of its exterior worn almost smooth by decades of handling. A tube that was meant for rolled scrolls but which would fit another object of a similar shape and size. Her heart was hammering in her chest now – she had lived with one foot in the world of the Palatium for a long time but, after this act, she would finally become a true revolutionary, just like Sakiri.

And then, feeling every second rush past, she scrambled up the gantry to the priests and presented them brightly with the case. 'Urgent message from the Fabricator General, adepts!'

And that made them feel important and they clustered around it, opening it up to see the last second of the mining charge's burning fuse. Davien had

thrown herself back down the length of the gantry, so that the explosion took her and shook her, but no more. The sound thundered back and forth in the enclosed space and she could only hope it was masked by the pyrotechnics above.

She looked, finding three splayed, scorched bodies. Only three?

Halfway to the levers she found the fourth. He'd been swifter than his fellows, or else hidden behind them. He'd been hanging off the gantry by one cybernetic arm but now he hauled himself up before her, smoking slightly. The lens of his artificial eye was cracked.

'You—' he started, and doubtless he'd be shouting for help next, and the explosion would probably have skitarii already on their way. She had no time. No time to invent a story, to bow, to apologise, to cringe and beg. And she found there was none of that lifelong timidity left now. The detonation had driven it out of her. Instead she leapt on the half-dazed tech-priest and tore at him with her nails, with her teeth, even. She drove her thumbs into his throat, she worried at the cables that ran from his eye socket until she'd bitten through them. She beat his skull against the twisted gantry railing, aware of all of the prisoners' eyes on her. Of Sakiri's eyes.

And at last he stumbled back, flailing, and she threw her weight against him, and then he was out beyond the broken rail, clawing at the air, falling in a tangle of panicked flesh and broken mechanisms until he crashed down between the bell jars and was still.

And she felt only elation. She felt as though the Emperor's very angels leant close to the world to tell her she had done well. A mad grin was stretching the corners of her mouth. *Happy Ascension Day*, she thought, and began throwing levers.

9

Burzulem couldn't really recline, what with his body lacking anything approaching a waist. Instead he was up on his dais overlooking the arena grounds, eating spiced mercury sweetmeats and making sneering observations to Alloysia. Down below him, on the arena's plascrete field, was the great alembic, into which all the wretched offerings would be decanted at the height of the festivities. The servitors had the chemical fires beneath it up to a fine blaze, the flames leaping blue and green and white as Burzulem applauded each change. His particular cronies of the moment were up on the podium with him, sitting at his many feet and feigning appreciation of the man's eclectic humours. And Triskellian, of course. Not as a favourite but as the butt of those witticisms, wearing the invisible fool's hat of Chief Festiviator. And if Burzulem was surprised by the stoicism with which he bore it all, the man didn't show it. Probably the Fabricator General thought that he had old Visceral well and truly whipped.

Well, let him.

The little vox-bead he had wired to his ear was giving him a scattershot picture of the Congregation's uprising in South Chasm and it was all going perfectly satisfactorily. They'd put on a good show, and the local forces had been swamped by them and were pulling back to the central districts of the city. The word would be with Burzulem soon enough – it would have reached him sooner save that Triskellian had inserted himself into the chain of communication and was keeping a lid on the pot to let it get up to the boil.

The Morod forces he had direct control of, that should have descended on the whole sordid squabble and penned the rioters within South Chasm, were

following his meticulous instructions to the letter, holding themselves ready to intervene without ever actually doing it. Meanwhile, Alpha Primus Ten-Tangram was still disembarking more of his returnees, billeting them in garrisons near the Palatium to await Triskellian's word.

He was walking a very narrow line. If anyone ever discovered just what had gone on in Auctorites today, somehow unearthed all the communications logs or dug up the precise commands Triskellian had given to the various skitarii squads, then his name would indeed be known in the annals of the Adeptus Mechanicus, but only as an arch-heretek. He was painfully aware that nobody would understand that he only had the order's *good* at heart. *Sometimes we must do these things, towards the greater end.*

Burzulem had plainly just made some barbed remark at his expense. The strained look on Triskellian's face evidently pleased him. A moment later, a very junior tech-acolyte was pelting up the steps to reach the Fabricator General, wheezing as his artificial lungs lagged behind his exertions. He had a scroll in one hand, which he proffered wordlessly.

Triskellian had practically been tracking the vanguard of news as it raced from the rail depot to the Palatium and then, finding Burzulem absent, rebounded off in the direction of the arena. He braced, because this was one juncture where his calculations were strung out over an abyss of uncertainty. He had to make sure the Fabricator General did not make any overly wise decisions right about now.

Already standing, Burzulem nonetheless gave the impression of leaping to his feet. 'What?' he demanded, to the bafflement of everyone around them. 'They dare threaten our glorious celebration?' He stared about him at their blank faces and then kicked out at the nearest of them, enraged by their mute incomprehension. 'Some rabble of workers is marching about in the poor districts, burning things and *complaining*,' he said, as though the latter was worse than ever the former could have been. 'Some mob of ingrates who dare slip their collar and run riot! An affront to our sacred order, on the very day we celebrate! Does the tool turn to bite the hand of the enginseer?' His mouth opened to start bellowing orders, and Triskellian recognised his cue.

'But Fabricator General, surely this is nothing our skitarii cannot put down?' And truly it wouldn't have mattered what he said, right then. He'd been the lightning rod for Burzulem's temper plenty of times before. The

key element was grabbing the man's attention at just the right time, so that he became a stand-in for all Burzulem's foul temper and frustration.

'This is *your* fault!' the Fabricator General roared, voice resounding through the bell of his body. 'You're my Chief Festiviator, Triskellian. You're supposed to see that everything runs properly!'

'Fabricator General.' Triskellian pitched his voice to carry to all the priests around. 'If our resources weren't so tied up with these festivities right now...' To remind those of like mind just how Burzulem's priorities were pulling everything out of shape.

'You dare to blame me?' And in making the accusation Burzulem was unwittingly planting the thought in everyone's minds. 'This is what happens when you let the soft sciences manage something! All inexact and things leaking everywhere. It wouldn't have happened on anyone else's watch!'

Truer than you know. 'Fabricator General, our skitarii will have it all in hand. I'll see to it personally.'

'You most certainly *shall!*' Burzulem told him. 'Alloysia, can you believe the man? A day or so ago he was saying he'd be fit to fill your shoes, and now he can't even organise a festival without the rabble rising up to spoil everything. After this is over, I want squads in every clave in South Chasm. I want a member of every household whipped in the street. I want ringleaders excruciated publicly. This isn't the end of this, Visceral. I'll have your hide, too, if you don't do your cursed *job!*'

Triskellian worked hard at looking suitably chastened, thinking, *Oh, you're right, this isn't the end at all.* He stood and backed off, retreating up the rake of the seats so that he could connect by vox to Ten-Tangram without any danger of being overhead. Those priests eligible to witness the centrepiece of the celebrations were mostly assembled now, gathered like a red stain about the stairs surrounding the podium. Admission was a coveted privilege. The place could have held four times the number; they could have emptied the Palatium and lined the steps with acolytes and clerks and all the little people who actually made sure everything was clean and everyone got fed. But Burzulem was jealous of his pleasures. Only those he chose to invite, or were so senior he couldn't exclude them, got to see with their own eyes.

Burzulem's greedy eyes were back on the alembic. A choir had assembled before the bubbling cauldron, their perfectly modulated voices rising up

over the hubbub of the crowd, amplified by their own implants. Their performance was beautiful, a purity of tone and harmony expressing the deep truths of mathematics, without approaching anything so mundane as melody. Triskellian wasn't a music lover. He appreciated the equations that informed the composition, but he felt the cold perfection of the work ring hollow.

'Adept.' The distant, staticky voice of Ten-Tangram.

'Alpha primus. Your disposition?' He surveyed his mental map of Auctorites – the wretched southern districts *here*, where the insurgents were surging from; the arena *here*, and beyond it the walls of the Palatium complex, where his final trap would be sprung.

Ten-Tangram gave him information in clipped, efficient terms: numbers of disembarked skitarii, their disposition to the various garrison sites Triskellian had authorised. All within easy strike of the Palatium. None directly in the path of the rioters. Perfect, at least for Triskellian's purposes. But he sensed that Ten-Tangram was at least curious as to the odd orders. No questions, because it wasn't for a skitarius to query a tech-priest, but the man nonetheless managed to insert an interrogative twist to his words.

An uncertain commander might mean uncertain troops, and Triskellian would need them to act decisively and fast when he needed them. 'Describe morale levels within your squads, alpha primus,' he ordered.

A pause as Ten-Tangram weighed what must have seemed an odd question. '*We are content, adept. It is a momentous day. We have returned to our first world after having seen so many. I am to lead my troops in a prayer of thanks for our deliverance from the warp.*'

The simplicity of the man's response made Triskellian feel suddenly wretched. *After having seen so many.* And if Triskellian tried to explain what he was doing and how he intended to use Ten-Tangram's people as part of his plan, how miserable would that make him sound? How *petty*, to drag them into a squabble about who should direct the fortunes of a single orb in all the vast, angry cosmos?

No. It is important. Morod deserves better than Burzulem's excesses. 'Give thanks,' he told the alpha, thinking, *And may we all shortly have much to give thanks for.* And then the fireworks had resumed and he ended the conversation and returned to his seat, trying to seem like a man who'd been putting down an insurrection.

A great battery of explosives roared away around the alembic, sending flares of red and orange, blue and silver high into the air. Skulls and gears, geometric shapes and numerical proofs flashed in momentary glory across the heavens. Fragments of burning foil and powder rained down on the arena like stars. *Waste*, Triskellian thought. Everything Burzulem touched became a pointless sink of resources, from these festivities to the man's damned art. *Which I will consign to the fires myself, and let that be the last thing burned on this world that does not go to fuel an engine.*

The last of the fireworks thundered away, and he wondered what other thunder the sound was covering. He was tracking the uprising. The Congregation's vanguard had reached the rail depots of the inner city by whatever cobbled-together means they could manufacture. The civic defence skitarii were making a game attempt to bottle them up there, but it wouldn't last for long, not without all the troops Triskellian was withholding. He felt a weird exhilaration, a man playing both sides of a strategic game, for the highest stakes.

And then there was a great murmur of interest throughout the gathered priesthood because it was time for the main event. The chemical coals under the alembic had reached an eye-searing purple and the roiling molten metal within was ready for its special ingredient. He heard the winches and engines beneath the arena groan into life, and the big hatches opened.

Up came the bell jars, to be hoisted up onto the scaffolding and then tipped out, one by one, so that what was imperfect in Morod could be symbolically purified and transfigured. Up came the excruciation frame, all wired so that its five-armed occupant could be lit up and made to jerk and dance and spark, a living firework to burn and writhe for hours for the greater glory of progress and knowledge.

Except the bell jars were just a shattered slew of glass shards.

Except the frame's cuffs and straps hung loose.

Crouching atop what had been intended as her own implement of torture and death was Sakiri, hideous in her abomination. They'd left her with little for modesty, of course, and so the whole articulated carapace of her skin was visible, the horror of her head, purplish skin stretched tight over the long curve of her inhuman skull. She had a carbine in two of her hands and the bulk of an arc pistol in the third, and none of that boded well for the skitarii who'd been tending to the prisoners. The final firework cracked its

thunder across the sky and left only a dreadful, appalled silence in its wake, the whole select gathering of tech-priests frozen in horror at what they were seeing.

For a moment, Triskellian was wrong-footed. This wasn't part of the plan. And yet of course it had been. The horrible old woman who led the Congregation had asked for the emergency release frequencies. And he had given them to her.

He was standing, a little ahead of the rest, already shuffling back and sending for the skitarii he controlled so they could act as escort. He had a sudden desire to be away from the arena. All around him his peers were starting to cry out, to complain, to deny what they were seeing, but not to *act*. *And that is the very symptom of what Burzulem has brought us to.*

Sakiri, the three-armed monster, stared at them all with alien eyes. She cocked that deformed head back and cried out to them, 'Do I disappoint you, Taskmasters? Is this not what you wished to see?' Her three arms spread wide, showing them the full horror of her warped frame. And then the others were swarming up from below, all the impurities that were to have been so ceremonially burned away.

And yes, many of the offerings were genuine mutants or just mauled by accident or mischance of birth, but a fair number of the offerings had been Sakiri's kin and, gathered all together in one place, it showed. Too many deviations from the human which all led in the same direction. Too many ridgy skins of the same blue-purple tone, too many distended jaws and elongated skulls. Noseless faces, jagged fangs, extra arms. The multiplication of these symptoms led to the inescapable detection of the xenos.

Sakiri cried out to her rabble, 'Tear them down! Drag them from their lofty seats and show them what it's like down here in the dirt! Death to the Taskmasters!' She unleashed her guns at the crowd. The pistol was just flash and flame at that range but the carbine drilled a mid-ranking cybersmith through his still-organic throat.

Some of the others had proper weapons; the rest just had stolen tools or shards of glass. Or talons sprouting where fingers should have been. All of them were swarming forwards, those with the alien taint at the fore, the mere mutants and invalids following up as best they could. And skitarii were shooting down at them, but there weren't so many here in the arena,

after all. They were all off at the rail depot, failing to keep the main thrust of the uprising contained.

‘Triskellian!’ Burzulem was at his elbow. ‘How has this happened?’

‘Betrayed, Fabricator General!’ The first words that came to Triskellian’s mouth, sounding sincere because he knew them to be true. And, having drawn that line himself, he was automatically standing on the same side of it as Burzulem, beyond suspicion.

‘Alloysia! Our festival!’ And the man was genuinely more upset that his little celebration had been spoiled than that there were armed monsters throwing jagged glass into the roiling mass of his people.

And Sakiri, striding forwards, guns never silent, her eye on Burzulem.

I could abandon him here, let her kill him. Not the plan but not a bad plan for all that. Except Burzulem had his elbow, because here were the skitarii to escort Triskellian away. And he wondered, for just a cut-off moment, whether he could simply kill the Fabricator General here and now and be done with it. But that was a step he couldn’t order the soldiers to take – too evidently against their inbuilt priority list. Too many witnesses. *Bide your time, Triskellian.*

Then Alloysia’s great Kastelan robot was lumbering to stand between the ragged escapees and Burzulem, rather than actually wading into the fray where it might have been useful.

‘Visceral!’ Burzulem still had his elbow, and hauled him close. ‘What have you done?’ And for a moment he thought the Fabricator General had seen it all, the whole seditious plot. Even as Burzulem shook him, he stammered for a reply, reaching out to test whether he could turn Ten-Tangram’s troops against his fellow tech-priests in direct insurrection. But then Burzulem was bellowing, ‘I put you in charge of this!’ His amplified voice was as loud as the gunfire and the pyrotechnics had been. ‘How can one man be so incompetent?’ And Triskellian decided, narrowly, that it was just the spoiled ceremony the man was furious at. Burzulem hadn’t even scratched the surface of how wrong things were about to go for him.

‘Retreat to the palace, Fabricator General!’ he insisted. ‘I will deal with this, and with the city!’

Triskellian’s artificial ear was still ringing with urgent dispatches from the rail depot. The insurrectionists had a solid beachhead there now, pushing outwards towards the heart of the city even as more of them came up the

rails. Skitarii and tech-priests were making panicked reports about monsters: not just the twisted Congregation's three-quarter-human aberrations, but things that had a lot more xenos in their make-up. *The older generation*. Which meant that, perversely, everything was going according to plan. The nasty little cult had dug out all of its buried scions, just as he'd demanded. When he came to mop them up, he'd get them all.

And Triskellian acknowledged their cries, and his responses only funnelled the rioters towards the palace's impregnable gates.

'Yes, the Palatium!' Burzulem confirmed. 'We will command the defence from there!' As though his retreat was anything more than mere self-preservation. It was almost as if he were a part of Triskellian's plans himself. Again, the idea of being the sole player in a complicated game occurred: here were the insurrectionists, pushing forwards along their intended path, believing they were winning. Here were the regular skitarii, pulling back their armour and their troops in the understanding that this was the best way to combat the uprising. Here were Ten-Tangram's hardened veterans, placed in and around the Palatium, the jaws of the trap. It was all going like clockwork, despite the untimely release of Sakiri. And if a tech-priest couldn't appreciate a well-constructed piece of machinery, who could?

10

After the brutal skirmish, the bulk of the tech-priests fled towards the Palatium, while Davien and the surviving offerings regrouped outside the arena. It was on fire, she saw. Some of the Congregation had broken the alembic's scaffolding and the great cauldron had rolled over on its side like a dying leviathan, spilling molten effluvia across the plascrete floor, letting it runnel down into the prison depths below to consume the bodies of their erstwhile gaolers. Others had taken rods and spars to the chemical fires, spreading them as far as they would go, or got into the fireworks stored for later in the festivities, spilling their explosive entrails across the seating and then setting light to it. The centrepiece of the priesthood's grand show of purity was now home only to differing degrees and colours of flame.

The people she saw around her just looked dazed, now. Many – the genuinely sick and weak – looked as though the exertion had almost done for them. But they were glad of it, she decided. Glad they had turned upon the hand that oppressed them, just this once. And, now the last firework's echo had faded, there was more thunder in the air. It came from the direction of the rail depot.

'The Congregation is coming,' she whispered to Sakiri. The woman was hunched in a ragged cloak she'd made from a red robe, ripped from one of her victims. Another strip of crimson was skewed over her gaping socket, the eye the priests had taken from her. She crouched atop a truncated statue – some ancient tech-priest immortalised in plascrete and now missing everything above the waist.

'Many things are coming,' the woman told her, then cocked her head. 'Tell them, not me.'

‘Them?’

‘Your troops, little general.’

Davien looked helplessly about at the former offerings, and they were indeed looking at their rescuer. She shrank from them. ‘I can’t. I’m not like that. I’m just a messenger.’

‘Is that so?’

‘I’m not Claress. I can’t just *speak*.’

‘Nor me,’ Sakiri said wryly. ‘The Emperor made me to *do*, not talk. But these lost ones need words, and you’ll have to find them. Look.’ Sakiri stood, bare toes hooking into the jagged stump of the statue, immediately commanding everyone’s attention. Some of them even cheered her but she spread her three hands out to quiet them.

‘Freedom is the gift we’re given the second we’re born, and that the Taskmasters take from us one second later,’ she told them. Her voice was cracked and raw, her body a battlefield between fanaticism and fatigue. ‘Freedom is the greatest thing in a universe made from chains. And it wasn’t me who gave you your freedom.’ One hand lunged like a serpent and caught Davien, hauling her up to stand beside Sakiri. ‘This one braved the guns and the chains to come get us. This one was the Divine Emperor’s agent, to spare us all from the fire.’ And then, in the resulting expectant silence when all eyes were on Davien, she whispered, ‘Now say what Claress might say.’

And Davien felt a kick inside her, as though some organ she never knew she’d possessed was suddenly pumping. She looked into their faces, her own little congregation, and they were connected to her, souls speaking to her soul. *My family*, she knew. *Blood of the angels*.

Her mouth opened, and the words fell into it, ready to be used like tools to shape these battered wretches into instruments of divinity.

‘Listen!’ she said, her high, thin voice finding new strength with each word. ‘Can you hear our brothers and sisters? They’re coming even now, all those who’ve suffered under the Hollow Men! You want your freedom? That is the sound of freedom! What’s the use of a life lived under the boots of the Taskmasters? What’s the point in being no more than a cog in their machine? Is this all we are? Fuel for their fires?’

By this point her own fires had swelled her voice into a clarion call to arms. ‘Better to end our lives in struggle than ground between their

mechanisms!’ she continued. ‘Better to die breaking their doors and tearing down their monuments! Those who die fighting for freedom, they die free!’ She was standing very straight, wondering what this force was, that worked and spoke through her even as the words still came. ‘We break the chains they put on us! We tear down the walls that keep us prisoner! The day of Union is here! The day when we cleanse the world of the Taskmasters and cast them down! Our sacred duty to the Emperor!’ She felt as though these were revelations being given to her, each new-minted in the second before it burst from her lips. ‘There is a time to worship with prayer and a time to worship with work, but today we worship by destroying the engines of the Hollow Men and breaking the hands that wield the whip! Better to die free and doing the Emperor’s will than live a slave! Do you hear me?’

They heard her. The cheer sounded as though three times as many people were gathered about her than Davien actually saw, and stronger and haler than any of them.

‘Arm yourselves!’ she told them. ‘Our brothers and sisters are coming to march on the Palatium, and they need our help!’

‘Here.’ Sakiri threw her carbine to the closest. She had always preferred her pistols. ‘Take up their weapons. Take sticks and stones if you’ve nothing more! Today you are warriors!’

‘Today,’ Davien shouted, ‘you are the song the Many-Handed Emperor shall follow when He brings His Blessed Union to Morod.’ An ineffable truth she couldn’t even have put into words a second before. *The Emperor’s angels speak through me. I am their instrument. I am filled with their grace until it overflows from me to all of you.*

Obediently, they spread out to search for weapons, along the street or back into the ruins of the arena. Davien sagged back down on her stump.

‘That,’ Sakiri croaked, ‘is how it’s done.’

And Davien opened her mouth to say that, yes, of course it was. To bless Sakiri with that torrent of divine inspiration which had gripped her. But, with her audience dispersed, the fit had abandoned her too, and she could only tremble at the emptiness it had left behind. A void into which all those bitter truths could seep.

Sakiri cocked an eye at her. ‘What?’

Davien just shook her head, but Sakiri jabbed her with a claw. ‘What?’

‘The tech-priest who caught you,’ Davien whispered. ‘He made me take

him to the magus. He told her to take to the streets. It's all to his plan.' She waited for the blow, the curse, for Sakiri, her hero, to denounce her. Instead, the three-

armed killer chuckled oddly.

'He thinks it is, but the Emperor is wiser than any priest. The Emperor is not *used* and it is time for His faithful to show themselves. Why else would Claress send me to the Palatium in the first place?'

'But...' Davien didn't dare say it, but Sakiri filled in the unspoken words.

'But I failed? I did. Came close, but failed still. And yet the Many-Handed Emperor is giving me a second chance, through you. The time is now. I can hear the angels singing to me from just the other side of the warp. We must lift our voices in prayer from the shattered ruin of the Palatium, standing on the broken bodies of the Taskmasters, or we'll just dwindle and become nothing.'

'The tech-priest...' Davien whispered. 'When he had me, he talked about... xenos blood. A taint within us, he said. He said we weren't blessed, that all we were for was to feed an alien hunger.' She felt like a heretic for saying it, and yet Sakiri's grin grew only wider, a kind of divine madness flickering at the edges.

'That is what the machine priests see,' the woman whispered. 'But we know that we shall become one with the angels who shall carry us with them to the stars. And who wouldn't want to become even a small part of the divine, rather than to slave and die for these Hollow Men?'

And Davien nodded, feeling the words resound inside her, touching that part of her that was kin-blood with Sakiri and being alchemised into inarguable truth. And by then the offerings had returned with what weapons they could find and she stood straight and called out to them. 'We march! To tear down the Hollow Men! For the people of Morod! For the Emperor! For the end of days!'

The skitarii at the rail depot were in full retreat by the time Davien saw them. Sakiri doubled her pace instantly, her clear voice raised in furious challenge, so that she and her ragged cohort caught one squad even as it tried to pull out, descending upon them from behind. The embattled cyborgs were ruthlessly dragged down and disassembled into meat and metal. Sakiri came out of the fray with two more pistols than she'd gone in with, and

plenty more of the offerings had a carbine torn from the hands of the enemy.

They found one of the Aunts carrying a banner and Sakiri pulled her up on the smouldering chassis of a downed Kataphron that still had one mechanical arm upraised as though to ward off the next blow. Before them milled the far greater crowd of Congregation members, miners and factorum workers. Where was Claress? The magus was elsewhere, urging on some other part of the crowd. There was only her.

Again, the youth that was Davien shied away from their massed attention, but then she could hear the singing, just an echo of it, coursing in her blood. She thrilled to it even as it terrified her. *Xenos taint*, Triskellian had said, and she had an image of vast wings unfurling in the void, ravenous jaws and segmented limbs. *Hunger*, for that song was all about hunger. It was terrible, but it was beautiful. To be part of something greater; to go on forever. And better the angels in all their fearful glory than the engines of the tech-priests. *If we are to be ground up and devoured, I choose the jaws.*

‘Death!’ Davien cried out to all their gaunt and dirty faces. ‘Death is the wage of every life. Death when their machines crush you! Death when their poisons sicken you! Death when you can’t work any more and they cut your food and water in the name of their efficiency! We all die, friends, so let us die in glorious struggle! Let us die with our hands about their throats!’

‘Let our deaths go to feed something grander than their furnaces!’ The words found her lips one by one without forethought, each exactly *right*. ‘Not their filthy machines! Not their hollow creed! For if we live and die for the Emperor, then the Emperor’s angels shall carry us with them forever, and in that way we *never* die!’

They surged forwards, took three districts, breaking windows and setting fires, before the skitarii showed their metal faces again, blockading them at Formulatus Plaza with a great show of red-robed force. They had barricades up, and the soldiers knelt and stood behind them, and at their backs were the four-legged bulks of two Dunecrawler tanks, dented and scarred from forcing their way through narrow streets. They opened fire the moment the insurgents came into sight, but by then the wave of revolution was converging on the square from several different routes, and there was plenty of cover. And they had more than just crude guns and knives. They’d hauled up heavy mining gear and the armoured Goliath rockgrinders, lasers

and cutters, even home-made launchers that lobbed mining charges high overhead to impact down amongst all that close-packed red.

And there were the Aunts and Uncles, of course; there were the Great-Aunts and Great-Uncles, out under the sun for the first time in living memory. They were swift and hunched and deadly, swarming up the walls of the neighbouring buildings, leading the charge before the many-handed banner. They scrambled over the barricades with an inhuman agility. The skitarii had only a couple of hurried volleys before it was knife and talon against their gun butts and power swords. And Sakiri was in the thick of it, dancing like lightning through the fray, with her pistols blazing and Davien trying to keep at her heels, dragged into the thick of the fighting by the song in her head. All around her the Aunts and Uncles were tearing into the metal lines of the skitarii, ripping open the red of their robes to get at the black oil beneath.

She saw hooked talons shear through steel, distended jaws catch about the metal face of one soldier and tear it away, lenses and conduits and all, revealing beneath where all that augmentation had been set into weak, raw flesh. And then a gun butt struck her shoulder and she was knocked from Sakiri's shadow, stumbling back over the scorched body of a Great-Aunt. A skitarius stood over her, mechanically levelling his weapon, and over his head spoke the great heavy guns of a Dunecrawler. Davien looked frantically left and right for help, but in that instant all she could see were the bodies of the fallen. Dead workers in bloodied overalls and torn protective gear, dead Aunts with their purplish carapaces cracked, their jaws agape. The tide of battle was eddying as the red-robed metal soldiers pushed back.

She knew fear, but then it was transformed within her to a blazing white rage, an emotion that came from elsewhere to fill her to the brim. The hilt of something was under her hand and she took it up, a curved knife inscribed with the Many-Handed Emperor's own image. The carbine spat fire that seared her shoulder but she was in past its barrel even as the shot came, ramming that blade into every part of the soldier she could reach, and careless of what might come after.

She struck steel, and then flesh, feeling a mad strength guide her hand. And more than that, she felt all the others, her kin, her Congregation. As she struck, so they rallied, as though her hands were knitting them all back

into a unified mass. As the soldier stumbled away from her, her people surged forwards on either side, hammering into the skitarii so that their lines bent and broke and those at the back began to flee.

Soon after, she watched as Uncle Eddarc himself scaled the smoke-belching Dunecrawler and tore off its top hatch, hauling out a pilot still connected to the machine by twisted umbilicals, and then tearing out the man's remaining innards before the crowd. By then Formulatus Plaza belonged to the Congregation and the skitarii were in full flight.

'And now we move on, you and I,' Sakiri decided, one ridgy hand on Davien's shoulder. 'We have work to do.'

'What work?'

'I thought you wanted to save your brother,' the woman said. 'There is also the matter of the gates of the Palatium wall, which will stand even against mining lasers unless we can open them. And I was given a target, and that target remains aggravatingly alive. They will have the Palatium sealed tight, for the man is a coward. I will get us to the Palatium. You can get us within the walls. Hey, Fomoran!'

Her voice cut through the sudden roar of dirtcycle engines as the subject of her cry drove up. He was a lean, bald man, a sweat-drenched headband about his grimy forehead. He was of the Congregation, a generation older than Davien, one younger than Sakiri. Davien knew him, the foreman of a team of prospectors who ranged the rocky wilds searching for untapped veins to mine. Atalan Jackals, who lived most of their lives without tech-priest supervision and had always been covert heroes to her and Niem. Now he pulled up on his grumbling bike with a long rifle over his shoulder and a half-dozen riders at his back.

'I'd heard you were dead,' he told Sakiri, with the ease of long association.

'You'll live in my shadow a few days yet,' she shot back. 'Get us to the Palatium, her and me.'

'There's fighting enough here for all of us,' Fomoran told her.

'The Many-Handed Emperor wills it,' Davien snapped.

For a moment both Sakiri and Fomoran stared at her, and she waited for them to slap her down, but then the man leant back in the saddle and barked a word to his fellows, who guided their bikes closer, nudging them through the crowd.

'We ride!' Fomoran told his followers. 'Sakiri, get up behind me. She can

go with Ammarco there.'

Davien got gingerly up behind the designated rider, trying to fit between the man and his panniers packed with mining charges, loose fuses tangled and hanging. *One stray shot...* But then Fomoran had yelled out another command and they were tearing off at a tangent to the insurgents' main advance, weaving through the streets of Auctorites' wealthy centre, the places that people from South Chasm were never supposed to see. When they passed by a bronze statue of some superannuated engineer or other, Ammarco hacked its head off with his power axe. Davien let out a high yell of triumph. She could feel the man laughing through the grip she had about his waist.

They met one band of skitarii on the way, belatedly rushing to reinforce Formulatus Plaza. Fomoran took himself up an overpass, separating from his people, who just roared ahead.

One of the riders was struck down, a scatter of carbine shot punching him out of the saddle and sending his limp form sprawling in the dust. The rest were on the skitarii before they could get another round off, hacking and beating, shooting them at point-blank range with pistols and shotguns. The skitarii alpha had a power sword with an edge that spat and seethed with undirected energy, and he hacked through the haft of Ammarco's axe, sending the head spinning away. The blade was drawn back for another blow, the alpha's face unreadable behind the steel slit of his helm. Then there was a hole punched past the rim of that slit and the man was down. Fomoran was shooting from the overpass, calmly picking off each individual enemy as they tried to fall back to a new position.

Soon after that, they were within sight of the palace, the remaining bikes pulling up in the shadow of one of the administrative archives. Davien and Sakiri slipped from behind their respective riders and took stock. Down along the broad front of the building, she could see there were skitarii outside the main gate. Not so many, and for a moment she thought Fomoran might just charge them here and now, relying on shock and fury to overcome their numbers. She backed off from the bikes, braced for the sudden roar of their engines.

Instead, Fomoran said, 'I have a fight to get back to.'

'The Emperor smiles on you,' Sakiri told him, a hand on his shoulder. 'We'll all be in His embrace soon, one way or another.'

‘I long for it,’ he said. ‘An end to work. An end to pain. A return to the arms of our blessed father. Isn’t that what we used to say when we were young?’ For a moment his lean, creased face was oddly vulnerable. ‘Is it now, Sakiri? Is it really the promised day?’

And Davien knew the answer was *No*, because all of this had been set off by some scheming tech-priest, and tomorrow would see them all at Triskellian’s mercy. And yet Sakiri just squeezed the man’s shoulder and said, ‘We must all have faith.’

Davien felt as though she were two people, the one whose very blood burned with an inarguable faith, the other with a mind sick with worry that she had betrayed everyone for a tech-priest’s game. She watched as the bikes roared into life and sped away.

OceanofPDF.com

11

‘Is your monster complete?’ Triskellian asked drily. Certainly the thing in the bell jar had grown to perhaps twice its original size, large enough now that he doubted it would fit through the cell’s neck in the unlikely event he should ever want to extract it. Or extract it whole, anyway. He would have plenty he could do with parts and pieces, in the fullness of time.

The lumpen thing stared angrily out at him, one slab-like hand resting on the transparent wall of its prison. It had several arms now. The processes Doctor Tesling had set in motion had triggered the same processes usually active in a growing foetus, so that the subject – Niem, Tesling called it – had undergone a riot of growth and duplication. Not just bone and muscle mass: there were little vestigial limbs, and one of its main arms had split into two at the elbow, fingers twitching and curling in concert. Its head had begun the same kind of division, he noted with distaste, but stopped part way. Three eyes stared out at him, one human and blue, the other two yellow and devoid of pupil. The procedure had prompted the thing’s metabolism to sprout plenty of features derived entirely from its alien heritage too. It had a long, segmented tail ending in a foot-long bone blade, and its hide was covered haphazardly with plates of dermal armour. There were jutting fingers of bone along its spine, and one of its additional arms sported three curved claws useless for any kind of civilised task.

Claven brought him the latest test results, set out in neat rows of script. Over his shoulder, Herma’s voice rang out, ‘Physical resilience of the subject has increased by fourteen per cent since previous sampling. It is exceeding expectations, Gammat.’

‘Quite.’ Triskellian surveyed the monstrosity, reflecting that not all the

ways those expectations had been exceeded had been positive.

‘When we come to our next project, doctor,’ he decided, ‘you will have to exercise a little more discipline. We will keep the enhanced physique and durability, the elasticity of the flesh. But we can do without these flourishes.’

The thing within the jar snarled soundlessly and flung itself against the clear barrier between them. Triskellian didn’t give it the pleasure of seeing him flinch. Without the emergency codes even this *thing* couldn’t break the glass.

Doctor Tesling wrung his hands, lips moving in some heretical prayer. Triskellian would have to break him of that habit quickly enough. He had wondered if Tesling would ever get to the point where he could wear a red robe and be seen in public. He was human enough, after all. If he was bald, so were most of the tech-priests, background radiation being what it was. If he wore goggles to hide his discoloured eyes, well, that hardly distinguished him from the average engineeer or datasmith. No, the changes Triskellian needed to make were internal. The man wasn’t quite broken in. *I will have Herma recite morally correcting scripture to him. She’s good at that.*

‘Doctor, I’m going to drag you away from your patient now,’ he said, placing his metal hand on Tesling’s shoulder. The touch of the steel fingers always made the man shudder. *Another habit I’ll need to break him of. Perhaps when he has a prosthetic of his own...* ‘Claven, Herma, continue to monitor the subject in our absence.’

Triskellian had already chosen his vantage point from which to conduct today’s feats of generalship. Up on the levels above his laboratory there was an ancient viewing chamber, which had once been used to tutor new generations of tech-priests in the sacred and prescribed rituals of maintenance and repair. Typically, the chamber itself had then fallen into disuse and the classes had moved to other locales, but Triskellian had set a half-dozen of his juniors to restore some functionality and, by proper application of prayer and elbow grease, they had the main screen connected to some of the eyes looking out over the Dodecahedral Plaza before the Palatium wall. Many of those ancient eyes were entirely blind, but through the remaining few he commanded a good view of the approach.

Burzulem’s whimsy over the decades had stripped the palace of its original impregnability. The man was fond of windows and arches and architectural

follies that elegantly demonstrated mathematical truths but were inadequate for the purpose of keeping undesirables out. However, he had not compromised the outer wall, which ran all the way around the perimeter, enclosing both the Palatium Lucidium and its immediate grounds. The wall was high and sheer, capped with electrified fists of spikes and studded with gun emplacements, some of which still functioned. It would suffice to hold the mob until Triskellian was ready for them. Let them spend their strength against its steel.

He took Tesling to the viewing chamber, the space solely his as his siblings cowered in their dormitories or prayed for deliverance from the terrible mob. *And I shall deliver you, my fellows. Once this debacle has convinced everyone that Burzulem is not fit to hold office, I shall beat the rabble back to their hovels and save the day. Who will deny me pre-eminence then? The algorithms will have to choose a new leader, and who else could be selected, other than the man who quelled a rebellion?* He was already composing the relevant communiques to Mars in his head.

The screen flickered dully to life once he had Tesling in front of it. The Congregation and their insurrection were within sight of the wall, an unruly tide of semi-humanity oozing along the approach to the great main gate. Like some dreadful colony organism, a slime-mould or spread of fungus, Triskellian fancied. They were so *messy* and undisciplined. Now they had won a few skirmishes there was almost an air of festival to the whole business. Some of them were chanting, some even dancing. He saw flags and banners, that dreadful mangled Emperor figure with its horrible smile and taloned hands overflowing with stars.

‘What even is that nonsense?’ he asked Tesling, feeling indulgent. Let the man run out the last of his heresy.

‘It is the Many-Handed One,’ Tesling’s thin voice whispered. ‘He will come for us with His thousand offspring. His hundred hands will clasp us to Him. He will take us with Him when He flies between the stars, and we will live forever.’ His voice trembled as he looked on the great mass of his kin, close to tears.

‘Will you indeed?’ And Triskellian sent the command that opened some other eyes close to the palace, so that part of the screen now showed a host of Ten-Tangram’s people, waiting in silent readiness for his orders. The contrast between their deadly quiet and the inappropriate cheer of the

insurrectionists was marked.

‘Let me tell you, doctor, how it will be between us, going forwards,’ Triskellian explained pleasantly. ‘This business will soon be at an end. I will crush the life from your Congregation, erase the threat it poses to us. Once it has done its job. Once it has let my fellows see how weak the hand that guides it truly is. Once I have taken on that mantle, and earned the role of Fabricator General by whipping your curs back to their holes.’ He had his metal hand pincer the medicae’s chin and tilt Tesling’s head back, while his living one pushed the goggles up that creased forehead. Tesling’s watery, yellowing eyes stared helplessly up at him.

‘Do not despair,’ Triskellian told him. ‘You will have your immortality.’ He permitted himself a smile. He would *not* go the way of Burzulem, with self-gratifying jokes and giggling, but he felt he was owed a modest smile, after all his hard work. ‘When I have broken the back of your wretched cult, dug out all its abominations, scoured its nests and hatcheries, I will yet preserve it. Suitably domesticated and tamed, those parts of your genetic code that can be made subordinate to our human strength shall be put to work within our bodies, just as the people of Morod work within our factories. They shall make us stronger, doctor. They shall help us resist the poisons and the radiation and the infirmities attendant on our eternal work. They shall give a new vitality to the flesh, to better endure our sacred communion with the steel.’

He stared without mercy into Tesling’s twisted face, feeding on the outrage he saw there. ‘It is a fine irony, isn’t it? When your xenos progenitors came to this world, they sought to suborn and dominate the human within their victims. But now they have done that work – all unknowing, insensate animals as they were – I shall dominate the xenos within their descendants and make it a slave to the human. I shall conquer using their own tools, and your eternal life shall be within a renewed and improved Adeptus Mechanicus.’

And then a new voice, breaking in, said, ‘I thought it must be something hideously organic, Alloy, but I never quite dreamed the priorities of our friend Visceral would be so subject to mutation.’

Triskellian whirled. The viewing chamber door had slid open soundlessly. He’d had no warning of it at all. He saw Alloysia the datasmith connected to it by one of her cables, smiling at him politely. The vast bulk of her

Kastelan robot loomed in the doorway. Ahead of it, flanked by six of his personal skitarii – the ones outside Triskellian’s command structures – was Burzulem.

The bell-like shape of the Fabricator General drifted forwards, many feet tapping at the chipped flags of the floor. In one of his hands, Triskellian could not help but notice, was the weight of a volkite blaster, more than enough to do irreparable damage to either flesh or prosthetics.

‘I am disappointed in you, Visceral,’ Burzulem said. He was trying for his usual flippancy, but there was a very real anger rising up from the little fleshy remnant within him that gave his words edge and snarl. ‘You obviously think I am some sort of blind idiot not to notice the treason that you’ve set yourself to. I am already taking steps to reintegrate the bulk of our skitarii into a unified command structure. Or Alloy is. She was always better at that sort of thing than me. Or you, for that matter. Do you really think our glorious order would have stood so long if any ambitious malcontent could just interfere with the hierarchy and get away with it?’ He leant in, body tilting to make up for a lack of waist. Now it was Triskellian being loomed over, and he didn’t like the reversed circumstances one bit.

‘And so I came here to remonstrate with you, Visceral,’ Burzulem drawled. ‘Put you in your place. A little talking to from your superior to bring you back into line. And what should I hear but the rankest and most abominable heresy. Dealing with xenos filth, with... whatever *this* wormlike character might be. Incorporating hideous material into our very bodies. You’re beyond recovery, Triskellian. I’m going to have to have you rendered down for parts. And, because I wouldn’t deny you the opportunity to meditate on your sins and seek the forgiveness of the Ommissiah, I rather think I’ll do it while you’re still alive. What’s that word you genetors like so much? Vivisection? A rather fitting end for a traitor of your particular bent. Apt, don’t you think, Alloy?’

‘Most appropriate, Fabricator General,’ replied his locum.

‘Entirely fitting and proper,’ Burzulem agreed in turn. ‘And now, Alloy, if you would kindly attend to the security of our gates before matters outside the Palatium get out of hand. But leave me the skitarii in case Visceral here has further inappropriate ambitions.’

With a smirk at the very thought, Alloysia withdrew, her Kastelan clumping laboriously in her wake.

‘Fabricator General,’ Triskellian said hoarsely. ‘I have... proofs. I have research. There are so many problems – of the flesh and the steel, and where they meet – that can be solved by utilising this new resource. It’s no different to a new mineral we might discover, a blending of metals. It’s just something to be *used* to our benefit. Something new.’

‘New,’ said Burzulem, as though there was no more appalling word in the universe. ‘We don’t want your *new*, Visceral. We are an institution built on tradition and reverence of all our generations back to the first. If we had been intended to use this *new* of yours, the Omnissiah would have provided us with the appropriate manuals and rituals. It is a filthy deviance and I won’t have it, I...’ His body jerked back, head turning to the screen behind Triskellian. ‘Is that supposed to be happening?’

Triskellian risked one glance, seeing that the square before the Palatium was in chaos, filled with the banners and bodies of the protestors. There was sporadic fire coming from the various gun ports and emplacements of the wall itself, but the crowd wasn’t dispersing, and there were big rockgrinder vehicles being moved in along side streets. He should be sending Ten-Tangram’s people in *now*, if only Burzulem hadn’t–

‘Are they...’ the Fabricator General enquired, his voice abruptly timorous, ‘are they going *through* the gates?’

Triskellian couldn’t tell if they were or not, but Burzulem’s attention was entirely on the screen and it was abundantly evident that he himself had nothing to lose. With a hiss that encapsulated years and years of loathing for his superior, he lunged forwards.

12

Davien had found a side gate, sure enough, a tiny sliver of a portal she could barely fit through, its original purpose long lost. It was set around with prohibitions and locks but she patiently adjusted the frequencies of her electroos until she was broadcasting the correct authorities and the ancient portal ground its way open.

Then it was a rapid run across the grounds to the Palatium itself. Nobody was about, and the priests' dormitories and chapels stood silent, all ritual abandoned. She heard the shrill whistle of engines building up a head of pressure that should have been tapped by antique custom, and the crackle and pop of untended fuses. The priests had fled to their stronghold.

Every window seemed to throng with anxious red-cowled heads as the tech-priests stared out, the thunder of the insurrection growing in the air. With Sakiri in tow, there was no way she could simply walk in the front door, or perhaps any door, but that wasn't going to be a problem. She circled the great edifice's angled walls, hunting out old ways she'd used many times before. Most of the Palatium clerks knew how to get in and out while evading the eyes of their masters.

Some sixth sense twitched at her shoulder blade, or perhaps she caught a flash of red from the corner of her eye. She found herself looking between a mouldering archive and a novices' dormitory, at the far end of which was a cloister-lined quad, quiet and used for the empty meditations of the tech-priests.

They were not using it now. It was full of people, nonetheless. Standing motionless and upright. Waiting.

More skitarii, she saw. But not the Fabricator General's pristine-polished

toy soldiers in their perfectly tailored uniforms. These were the returning skitarii from the ships in orbit. She was seeing weapons that had been used on far worlds, held still and ready in the flesh-and-metal hands of those who had employed them. Waiting for their moment to strike.

She ran back to Sakiri and told her. 'Should we warn the others?'

Sakiri regarded her without expression. 'We have our part to play, girl. We can serve best by having those gates open.'

'But—'

'Have *faith*, child. The Many-Handed Emperor will not reward us if we doubt. His angels will not come for us unless we lift our voices with certainty.'

The Many-Handed Emperor is just some xenos lie, she thought numbly. Even as she felt the tug inside her, her blood rising to Sakiri's call to arms, her mind twisted against it. *No, no, we'll die, we'll all die*. And her faith rang hollow, in that moment, and she grasped Sakiri's arm and begged, 'But is it true, though? Is there an Emperor with His angels, or is it the devouring monster the tech-priest told me of? Please, Sakiri.'

The woman's face was calm, peaceful even. 'What makes you think,' she said, 'that they are two different things? Now go ahead, girl, show me the secret ways into the Palatium, for I have a task I must complete.'

Davien took Sakiri up, climbing using rivets and rust-holes and the embossed characters of Adeptus Mechanicus doctrine until they were up on one of the sub-roofs, and then into a set of disused ducts that had once led into the murderous fires of a furnace, but now led nowhere save a cold and half-forgotten room where novices sometimes hid to experiment with chemicals or the side effects of their new prostheses.

As soon as they crept out from the pipes, Sakiri had her three pistols drawn.

'You're going to kill the Fabricator General now,' Davien said, understanding dawning. 'May He bless the work of your hands.' The old Congregation benediction, which seemed just as fitting for killing as for making and digging. 'Or there are the gates...'

Sakiri gave her an odd smile. 'There is a more pressing task. That of your brother's rescue.'

Davien's heart leapt. 'You'll come with me...?' and at Sakiri's nod, she was already in motion, hurrying, ducking back to let red robes pass and then

working her way from room to skulking room, hunting the quickest route down to the subterranean levels. To Triskellian's laboratory, where she hoped Niem still was. And Doctor Tesling, of course. She could rescue him as well. And then her fellows would be at the gates, and she could open them, and be the great hero of the Congregation alongside Sakiri. They could all go kill Burzulem together, and Triskellian...

Would do what he would do. She thought of those silent sentinels massed outside, ready to step in. *But I have faith*, she reminded herself, clutching for it. She reached for that song inside her, that had filled her mouth with brave words, but it had ebbed away now she was within the iron walls of the Palatium. *Xenos*, her mind thought, rather than *divine*. And if they were just the spawn of some alien *thing*, what did that make their destiny?

But by then they were approaching the doors of the laboratory. That was as far as her plan had gone, of course, because Triskellian didn't even allow other tech-priests in there, and she had no code or calculation that would open the doors, nor any path that would let her creep through the walls to get inside. Except someone had already done the work for her.

The doors had been peeled open, that was her only conclusion on witnessing the damage. She could see the imprints of vast fingers that had prised between them and pulled them apart. Knowing the tech-priests as she did, she reckoned it must have been one of their Kastelans, the hulking robots whose mechanical strength seemed limitless. Inside there were four skitarii keeping idle watch over the laboratory, guarding the cringing tech-priest who'd been Triskellian's helper, along with the trolley-mounted head he towed around behind him. There was no sign of Doctor Tesling or Triskellian himself, but Niem's bulk – larger than she'd seen him last – still squatted in its glass prison.

Davien opened her mouth but Sakiri was already moving. She swept into the violated lab like a storm, pistols speaking a rapid sentence that sent all four skitarii sprawling on the floor. In the aftermath, she directed her weapons at the priest – Claven, Davien recalled. The man was goggling at her, rescued from his own kind by a monster.

'What are these?' Sakiri demanded. 'Do I spare them?'

Davien strode over to Claven. 'Free my brother,' she demanded and, when he plainly didn't understand, she jabbed a finger at the bell jar. 'Him, free him!'

‘Impossible,’ Claven whispered. ‘The subject cannot be removed from his confinement. The experiment would be ruined.’

‘Let me change the parameters of your experiment,’ Sakiri suggested, and levelled a pistol at the man’s stitched-together face. Claven whimpered and stumbled towards one of the banks of controls.

‘No!’ the head on its trolley suddenly shouted. ‘Unacceptable. I forbid you to compromise the work, Claven!’

Sakiri goggled at the grotesque thing, not having realised the head was an independent entity. She added a second pistol to her threat, and Claven whimpered and put his hands on the levers.

‘Claven, I give you your last warning,’ the head insisted and then, when her words were plainly not going to stall him, there was a tremendous crackle and arc of blue lightning between the cables that connected the two. Claven jerked and shuddered at the levers, his hands melting and charring about the metal. The seams of his face burst with a series of pops and sizzles and then he was very still, standing bolt upright and smoking.

‘Weak,’ said the head, ‘he was weak,’ and then Sakiri shot her between the eyes.

Davien rushed to the controls, because surely she could try the same frequency as she had under the arena, even though Niem’s jar was twice the size and of far thicker glass. The electrocution of the tech-priest had fused them together, though, nothing but a great lump of dead metal.

‘Enough,’ Sakiri said, and unloaded a pistol at the armaglass.

The first three shots ricocheted away without making a mark, more a danger to Davien or Sakiri herself. Then one struck solidly, a rosette of crazed lines radiating from the impact point, but even then the glass remained whole.

‘I should have expected,’ Sakiri said, ‘that if there was one thing the Taskmasters built well it would be prisons.’

‘No, there’s got to be a way of breaking it,’ Davien muttered.

But then Niem himself stood, bowed by the curve of the jar. He would be twice the height of a tall man, upright. His shoulders and the great armoured muscles of his back were higher than his head. He lifted a spade-fingered hand and touched where Sakiri’s shot had marred the armaglass.

Davien watched his face – those achingly familiar features half-doubled, spread too wide, pushed down to make room for the chitinous plates of his

forehead.

Something flung itself at the glass past him. For a moment she thought there was some creature in there, like a serpent, but it was the lashing tail that Niem had grown. The spike at its tip was so swift she only saw it as it rebounded from the inside of the jar. It left its own scar.

Niem examined the mark carefully, three eyes all moving slightly out of sync. One of them met her gaze. She knew that look, no matter what changes Doctor Tesling had made to him. It was the stubborn brother she remembered, who would never be taught, and who would always have to do things his own way.

He placed a hand on the jar's side, a foot braced behind him, a hooked talon where the bullet's rose had bloomed. She saw the muscles shift and bulge, rippling his leathery hide and deforming the plates of his carapace. *Impossible*, she knew. Even with the little damage they'd inflicted, this was a prison of the Taskmasters, and like Sakiri said...

A new crack leapt between the bullet scar and the mark that Niem's tail had made. His face was screwed up like a dreadful malformed fist. She saw his mouth open, howling out his anger and frustration.

Another three white lines across the glass. Sakiri grabbed Davien's shoulder and hauled her back.

The jar exploded outwards. Jagged chunks of inches-thick glass scythed across the floor of the laboratory, doing further violence to the bodies of the fallen skitarii.

Niem lumbered free.

Davien stood in his shadow. He had been changed even before Triskellian had taken him. He had been on the road to monsterhood, to save him from the wasting disease that had been eating him alive. An experiment; an offering to the Emperor. All she had known was that he would have died otherwise, and that it was the will of the Many-Handed One. She hadn't understood that *this* would be the result.

He stood upright now, and the whole laboratory seemed too small to contain him. An animal grunting came from him with each heavy breath. All symmetry was gone from his shape, the new muscle mass and alien tissue sprouting and expanding each organ and limb to its own schedule. His face was a horror of uncontrolled division and growth.

'Niem,' she whispered.

‘D’rv’n.’ Despite his changed body, their kinship spoke to her, telling her that Tesling’s ministrations had not deformed or lessened him. They had brought him towards something higher. Half-human and half-divine, and things that are caught halfway in their progress to perfection must always seem strange. *This is what it means to be us*, she thought. *That we always know and love our own. If that is xenos, then how lonely and cold it is to be human.* And she ran forwards and threw her arms about him, and he hunkered down to his knees, gathering her carefully into his vast embrace.

Outside, they were fighting and dying, but right then she’d won. Niem was alive and free. They were reunited. Nothing else mattered.

‘That’s good,’ Sakiri’s ragged voice broke in. ‘But we have some gates to open, if our comrades are to reach the Palatium.’

Niem made a questioning sound, squinting at Sakiri as though he had to work hard to process the words.

‘It’s the day,’ Davien told him. ‘We’ve risen against the Hollow Men. And...’ *And it’s a trap. But we have to hope this trap cannot hold us. We have to hope we can beat not only the priesthood, but also the puppeteer, Triskellian. Or we’re lost.* ‘You understand, Niem?’ She looked into that face, wondering what his mind was like now, and whether understanding was even something he was capable of.

‘U’sss.’ He was having difficulty moving his jaw, getting the words out, but she heard a yes in there somewhere. ‘D’v’rnn...’ A spasm of frustration. ‘Drrrrvien.’ And then something more, something he was desperate to communicate, but which she couldn’t understand.

‘Later,’ she told him. ‘We’ll have all the time, later.’

Moving through the palace with Niem lacked the subtlety of their earlier infiltration. He loped along swiftly, bent double to go through the doors, but as quick on all fours as she was running. She knew where the chamber was that controlled the great gates. There would be tech-priests there directing the wall’s guns, too.

It was a high-ceilinged, dimly lit place, a cylinder of a chamber rising three storeys up into the Palatium’s convoluted architecture. The upper reaches glimmered with dim, shifting lights, an artificial constellation rendered piecemeal by time. It had all the hallmarks of a space originally intended for some role long forgotten, then repurposed to command the

walls in an age itself now ancient and half-myth. The actual control interfaces, all those levers and switches, were bolted onto the walls haphazardly, trailing cables and conduits snaking across the floor. Davien knew that there would be a whole shift of novices whose task it was to preserve this state of half-disassembly exactly, to the last inch of disarray, because that was *how it had always been*. There would be hymns and recitals unique to this one room, their meaning rubbed away into gibberish by generations of mindless repetition.

They are so frightened by change, she thought. And then: *We will give them change*.

And of course there were skitarii here. Some worked the guns, bent over to squint into the tiny windows that gave them a view outside the walls. Others were just standing watch over the priests. They were not the veterans she'd seen outside, but their carbines would kill just as easily.

But she had Sakiri on her side, of course. And she had Niem.

'How are the gates opened?' Sakiri asked her. There was a great wheel on the far side of the room, up on a gantry. It was bronze, and its hub was embossed with a skull surrounded by spikes. She suspected it had originally been a part of some other device entirely.

There came the sound of boots behind them. Davien guessed the Congregation were assaulting the wall with their Goliaths and their mining gear, and someone had been sent to see how the defence was going.

The little clerk she once was might have pulled back, waiting for some better moment that may never have come. She could feel the blood of all her kin out there, though, on the far side of the Palatium wall. They sang to her, and her own heart sang back, and over all of them she could hear the angelic chorus from on high, exhorting them to action. She was ahead of Sakiri, going in, with Niem thundering after them both, roaring.

She dodged past the crackle of the skitarii carbines, her eyes on the wheel. At the sound of gunfire, the marching boots from outside became a hurried run. More soldiers were coming, cramming the doorway. She saw a couple of novices scythed down by the shots of their own side, their canticles becoming shrieks of pain and feedback. Niem rounded on the newcomers, fists like hammers crashing down on them. His tail lashed across them, opening one man up in a shower of sparks and blood, knocking others sprawling. She saw shots crisp and char against his carapace.

She was at the steps to the gantry. A tech-priest got in her way, lashing out at her with the spike of a data-prong. She found that curved knife in her hand again, wedging the Emperor's image in the priest's throat and then casting his spasming body aside.

Below, Sakiri danced through the skitarii. She had a knife in one hand, pistols in the others. She was burning all the strength her divine blood gave her, pushing her rangy body to its limits. Davien could practically see steam coming off her as she ducked and darted past gun butts and clutching metal hands. But it was Niem who carried the day.

She had thought he had been made clumsy, when Tesling had reshaped him to save his life. She had thought he was a great leaden giant, ponderous and awkward. She would have loved him for it. He was still her brother. But she'd thought him slow. Now she saw that he had just been learning his body; that he had been holding himself back for fear, perhaps, of hurting her. Now he had found his strength *and* his speed.

He moved with a furious inevitability, a colossus of armour plates and spines and muscle dense as rock. They shot him and they shot him, and he killed them in return, took the skitarii in his great hands and tore them into ragged halves. She saw the flare of an arc pistol carve a great blackened gouge across his chest, and carbine shot pockmark his side, but he didn't slow, and his flesh bubbled and melted and regrew under the assault. A skitarii officer brought a power sword against him, carving open a gash across the armoured hunch of his back. Niem bellowed and lunged, catching the man by both wrists, the alpha's forearms practically vanishing in those huge hands. Davien saw Niem's fists convulse, crushing his enemy's arms into pulp and twisted metal, and then the taloned limb that jutted from his chest raked forwards and opened the officer up from throat to waist, spilling a cascade of severed wiring before Niem could tear into the meat beyond.

And then she was up on the gantry, the wheel before her, and a new tech-priest turned to stare at her in outrage. He was an old, withered stick of a creature, more than half machine, his robes writhing with connectors and cables like a nest of serpents. One of his eyes was a milky white, the other a cracked lens. A half-dozen insect-like metal limbs unfolded from within his robes, threatening her with drills and hot irons. 'Heretic!' The voice hissed from a box on his chest. 'Defiler!'

She lunged for him, and he grappled with her in turn, his machine limbs snapping and battering. A metal claw pincerred onto her forearm, threatening to clutch to the bone, and his shrivelled living hand fumbled for her eyes. And she was small and skinny from a lifetime of poor food but, in that moment, she felt the strength of her blood in her, generations of the divine Congregation funnelling down until it was just her, just Davien, here at the crux of all things.

She cast the old man down, tipping him over the rail, which he clung to with that metal hand and a couple of twining cables. Then she took up a wrench – a gilded piece, ornamented and sacred – and she beat him in the face until she had shattered his lens and his jaw, until she had broken the segmented metal cords that bound him to her, until his arm gave at the elbow and he fell to the hard floor below.

Still with that mad resolve lending strength to her muscles, she took hold of the great wheel and turned it, over and over, even as the fighting quieted at her back. She pictured the gates in the wall gaping open to their widest extent, her kin surging through into the Palatium grounds.

‘We did it,’ Davien said, shock and elation colouring her voice in equal measures.

‘Not yet,’ Sakiri told her. She was stalking through the bodies, one hand clutched to a ragged, bloody gash across her side. She prodded and kicked until she found a tech-priest still alive, though the metal guts of him were strewn across the floor. ‘Where is the Fabricator General?’ she demanded. ‘Where will I find him?’ She got three thumbs into the various sockets and tubes of the dying man’s throat. ‘I have a sacred duty. In the name of the Emperor, tell me!’

And perhaps it was that, and the priest misinterpreted her words. Certainly his Emperor wasn’t Sakiri’s, but in his last guttering moments Davien guessed he might have misunderstood who was talking to him. When Sakiri straightened up, wiping oil and blood from her hands, it was with a new purpose to her.

‘Where is the forward tutelary gallery?’ she asked.

Davien briefly ransacked her inner map of the palace, rattling off directions with an automatic efficiency the tech-priests would have been proud of. There was a holy fire in Sakiri’s face as she grasped how close her target was.

When she turned to go, the doorway was blocked by two figures. One was a slender tech-priest that Davien recognised as the Fabricator General's locum, Alloysia. The other, putting them all in its shadow, was the massive frame of her constant companion, the Kastelan.

'No!' Sakiri hissed. 'No more distractions.' Her sharp teeth were bared and her skin was waxy pale. Davien abruptly saw how her wounds were already sapping her, on top of the abuse and mistreatment of her captivity. She was spending the last of her strength, desperate to carry out her final mission.

Alloysia was staring aghast at the carnage she'd discovered, but a moment later she spoke words of command and the Kastelan's stance changed from plodding stomp to thunderous charge.

Sakiri vaulted aside, her pistol-shot scattering from the robot's armour, and though she was faster, she was tiring and the machine was indefatigable.

Davien felt Niem start to move – not physically, but because they were linked, blood to blood, will to will. He slammed into the Kastelan from the side, almost tipping it off its feet, pounding dents into its casing with his fists.

'Go, Sakiri!' shouted Davien. 'Go and do the will of the angels!' Not encouragement, but a flat-out command. And Sakiri, electrified, darted away, cloak swirling behind her. Alloysia shrieked and scrambled aside, thinking herself the target, but then Sakiri was gone, hunting out her last victim.

13

Triskellian had thought he might overbear Burzulem, tip that bulbous body to the floor and... something. Make some demands, speak words that would somehow commute the whole intolerable situation to his advantage. But although the Fabricator General wobbled and tipped, his centre of gravity seemed unassailable, his skittering little legs weaving and spreading to brace him. Triskellian grappled for the gun instead, because the blaster would punch some holes in Burzulem's bronze body as readily as it would Triskellian's flesh. He heard the skitarii start into action, carbines levelled but unable to shoot without hitting their master, and yanked Burzulem sideways, the pair of them dancing in drunken circles away from the soldiers. The whole undignified business was like a grotesque farce.

'Visceral!' Burzulem's face was fixed in a pop-eyed expression of astonishment, and his voice rang from his body without any mediation of throat or lips. 'I – really – must – *insist*...' And to Triskellian's horror he was stronger. The mechanisms of Burzulem's body were slowly outmatching his best efforts, turning the barrel of that murderous gun inch by inch until its yawning mouth was directed straight at Triskellian's face.

'You are,' Burzulem ground out inexorably, 'no longer welcome – within the faculty. Consider this a – termination of – *tenure*.'

And then the gunfire started.

Triskellian thought Burzulem had shot him at first, but his failing living strength had deflected the blaster's muzzle just enough that its energy lashed past his head, melting his cybernetic ear to slag. And the gunfire was still going on, and it wasn't the deadly energies of the volkite, but something more mechanical.

He and Burzulem broke apart, both reeling. It was the assassin. She'd come back.

She moved as the skitarii returned fire – not fleeing back into the corridor but leaping into the room, running swiftly from engine to duct, taking what cover she could with two pistols constantly chattering in her hands. The third hand was clutched to a savage wound in her abdomen that should have killed any regular human. Even with the world going to pieces around him, Triskellian had time for an admiring thought: *Such a metabolism! How I could make use of it!* He heard Tesling call the woman's name, 'Sakiri!' half in triumph and half in despair, because the assassin was bloodied and ragged already, looking on the point of collapse at any moment. Only that alien strength kept her going, burning her human flesh so that she could go on.

The skitarii were trying to put themselves between her and their master, but it only made them targets. The woman shot two more of them down in a blazing salvo of pistol fire, and a couple of spare bullets spanged off the Fabricator General's casing, sending him reeling and staggering as though he was still wrestling Triskellian. His arms waved, with no attempt at using the gun he was holding, and his voice whooped and stuttered, some part of its internal mechanism hit so that all he said was turned to manic gibberish. *No change there.* Triskellian looked around for Tesling in case the dwarfish doctor had caught any of the shot, but the man was cowering by the screen, bundled up as small as he could go. *Good. I've not finished with you yet.*

The assassin had finished the skitarii now, breathing heavily, blackish blood staining her clothes and pallid skin. Tesling made an abortive attempt to go to her, a medicae to his patient, but Triskellian pincered his shoulder and hauled him back. A heartbeat's worth of silence descended.

Sakiri was staring at her target down the length of the volkite pistol. Burzulem's metal hand shook wildly, and Triskellian had no idea if it was the damaged machinery or the terrified flesh that was the culprit. A twitch of the trigger might have razed half the room. Despite himself, Triskellian was lurching forwards, not even sure what he intended to accomplish.

The assassin emptied both guns into Burzulem, making his body toll and chime sonorously until his casing ruptured and the last four bullets carved churning tracks into his melange of innards. Triskellian had often idly wondered just how his superior was organised within that bronze shell, and

now he saw that – typically – it had been a mess in there. Surviving organic components arranged inefficiently in tanks and little vats; ducts and pipes and wiring crossing and tangled, everything without plan or reason. And now even more of a mess, of course, because Fabricator General Burzulem was ruptured. His metal outsides were split open and the final shots broke apart his receptacles and severed his connections, and that dreadful wordless yelling of his was finally stilled. Triskellian could only hope that meant he was dead; how terrible if some part of him was still living within that shell, mouthless, senseless and immobile. A grotesque thought. Perhaps he'd keep the wreck of Burzulem around for a while, just so he could contemplate it.

Burzulem's arm was stuck straight out and slightly up, as though indicating some particular corner of the ceiling that needed cleaning. Triskellian stepped forward, plucked the blaster from his loose metal fingers, and shot the assassin. She barely reacted. He sensed she'd burned through her last reserves of strength, as well as her ammunition, when she had fulfilled her purpose. The searing fire of the pistol took her across the chest and two arms, and flung her to the ground. Every appearance of being dead, but Triskellian made sure her pistols were nowhere near her twitching hands.

'Well,' he addressed the room, feeling a weird unreality as though the whole business had just been a particularly odd hypothetical question. 'It appears I was too slow to save the Fabricator General from his assassin a second time. But I have avenged him. So it shall be recorded. Doubtless he was coming here to congratulate me on my handling of the insurrection.'

It came to him, with another wave of light-headedness, that he'd actually done it. Burzulem was out of the way, in a manner that placed no blame on Triskellian whatsoever. He could put the final parts of his plan into action, put down the rioting with his reserves of new skitarii, and then assume the Fabricator Generalship of Morod with his grateful peers' acclamation.

Tesling had gone over to the assassin and was kneeling by her. Triskellian irritably plucked the man up by the collar and hauled him off. 'What do you think you're doing?'

'She... she needs help.'

'She needs to stay dead,' Triskellian said. 'She's done more than I could have hoped for, but dying is one final service she can render, and it's non-

negotiable.’ Tesling was protesting and pulling on his arm, but Triskellian levelled Burzulem’s pistol and put three more searing charges into the assassin’s corpse. He would have preferred to find some surgical tools and separate that grotesque head from its five-limbed body, but right now it was more important to ensure that the man’s kin outside were put in their place.

He contacted Ten-Tangram by vox.

‘Confirm your people are in position,’ he snapped. ‘I want you to bottle the rabble up in the Palatium grounds. Trap them between the outer wall and the palace itself. Put them down, alpha primus.’

‘Confirmed, adept.’

‘And find out how the gate was opened in the first place,’ Triskellian added, only now considering how close this whole business had come to a real disaster.

14

Davien skittered back as the two giants met. Niem was faster. He laid hands on the metal of the Kastelan and his fingers creased and crumpled its armoured plates, prising at them until they bent. His knife-edged tail scored bright sigils in its immaculate paintwork, defacing the tech-priests' proud livery.

Alloysia was snapping out commands, though, altering the robot's stance and its style of fighting. It braced against the pounding of Niem's fists and then dealt him a downward slam across head and shoulders that staggered him. Then it stepped smoothly back and the weapon across its shoulder belched incandescent white fire that swallowed half the room, wreathing Niem's tormented form. Davien cried out in horror, feeling the wash of heat crisp her own hair. And yet, when the eye-searing brightness had ebbed, Niem still stood. His rugged hide was blackened and smoking, sloughing off in peeling sheets and the skin beneath healing even as Davien watched. He bellowed, and though there were no coherent words in the sound, in her heart she heard his prayer to the angels. *Give me strength enough!* And he was back to grappling, wrenching the machine's limbs until its joints groaned and protested. Again the flames washed over him, scorching the robot as well, forcing Davien into stumbling flight over the bodies of the fallen skitarii to avoid being incinerated. She heard Alloysia's sharp voice spitting more commands.

The Kastelan was stronger. Niem had pounded dents and cracks in its shell, but the mechanical brawn of the robot was greater even than his augmented form. It was forcing him away from its mistress, bending him back, even as his tail and extra arm battered and hacked at it. But in its

progress, it had pushed the fight past where Davien crouched. She was at its back.

She took up one of the skitarii carbines, braced the stock against her shoulder and emptied the clip, her ragged fire scattering across half the room before she had the weapon trained on the robot's broad torso. Yet the shot just scattered from its armour with barely a mark to show for all her efforts, and the flamer gouted again, the two battling giants briefly just silhouettes against the glare of it.

Davien discarded the gun and grabbed another. She had the armoury of an entire skitarii detachment at her feet. Even as Niem roared in pain she had levelled the weapon, not at the Kastelan but at Alloysia.

Her first volley went wild, but it was enough to break Alloysia's concentration. The datasmith yelled more commands as she ducked for the doorway.

'Defend me! Protect me!'

The Kastelan lurched back across the room to put itself between its mistress and danger, and Davien gritted her teeth and sighted down the carbine, one last chance for a shot before her world became nothing but the looming robot.

The blaze of energy from the carbine punched a dozen holes in a line along the wall, and then that line intersected with Alloysia's head, tearing away half of what sat above the neck and leaving her stiletto form suddenly motionless. The remainder of her metal skull was left weirdly tilted, its inner workings open for inspection as though awaiting maintenance.

The Kastelan completed its retreat and stood mutely between its ruined mistress and Davien. And waited. The smoking barrel of its combustor was directed at her like the open mouth of a man who'd forgotten what he was about to say.

Only then did she turn to see what shape the rest of the silence was.

Niem was...

He lay in the centre of the room, staring up at those inconstant lights, his vast chest rising and falling slowly. Slower with each breath.

She tripped over the bodies in her hurry to get to him, ending up kneeling in the shadow of his form, clutching for the great weight of his closest hand. She could see his flesh trying to mend, but ever more sluggishly, the wounds reopening and leaking yellow fluid.

‘I was supposed to rescue you,’ she whispered. One of his eyes swivelled to regard her.

‘Drvvy,’ he got out, and then forced her name from his lips. ‘Davien.’ His breath shuddered through his body.

‘I’m sorry.’

The monstrous strength of his fingers closed ever so slightly on her own. Another hand, one of his smaller ones, touched her chin, tilting it until she met his eye again.

‘Hear them,’ he rumbled. His other eyes were staring up at the guttering constellations of the distant ceiling, the last stars he would ever see. ‘Angels, D’vien.’

Something ruptured inside him and his chest sunk in, the armour plates cracking. His eyes went dull and he died.

She could hear the fighting outside the Palatium walls, after that, but when she tried to leave to join her compatriots, the robot shifted to block her, and she shrank back from it. It would not attack her, but it was mindlessly following its last command to defend Alloysia, for all that she was dead and gone. Her body stood in the doorway, and that was the only way out of the room.

She knelt by Niem’s cooling form, thinking about all she’d done. Thinking about when he’d fallen ill, of Doctor Tesling’s promises to save him. Of when Triskellian had come and taken Niem away, and every action she’d taken since then. And she’d set the sands running on his life the moment she’d re-entered the Palatium with Sakiri.

That was where they found her. She didn’t even hear them push past Alloysia’s body and the statue that the robot had become. Abruptly a hard hand hauled her to her feet, even though she tried to cling to Niem’s body. She found herself staring at her own reflection in the steel helm of a skitarii alpha. Not one of the locals: one of the new ones, from the ships. There was a whole squad there, staring about at the devastation and the bodies of their provincial comrades.

‘Yes,’ she told her own distorted image. ‘I did this. I made it happen. I opened the gates. You’re too late.’ She braced herself for the blow, the blade, the shot. But he just held her, helm tilting down to stare at Niem’s colossal corpse.

‘What are you?’ His voice, from within the helm, was surprisingly human.

They hadn't cut it out of him yet. One of his people brought a scanner to her, reading the lies of her electroos, all that spurious identity that had allowed her to walk the Palatium halls as though she belonged.

'I am a child of angels!' she shouted into the slit of his helm, and she thought she saw him flinch, in its shadowy recesses. 'I am of the blood of the Many-Handed Emperor! Call me alien filth, but I am *chosen*!'

And still he didn't kill her, standing very still for a moment. Had her words stunned him? No, he was listening to orders.

'Confirmed, adept.' A pause. 'Already attended to, adept. We have a prisoner here. An infiltrator with clerk's electroos.'

Despite herself she leant in close, recognising the tinny echo of Triskellian's voice resounding from the receiver within the man's helm. '*Have your people create a cordon about the rioters ready to move in, but bring her to me. I'll deal with her myself.*'

And then they were dragging her away from Niem, off to meet her final judgement for what she'd done and what she was. The alpha hauled her through the palace, hand like an iron clamp about her arm and his squad shouldering their way along behind him. Those tech-priests she saw got out of their path quickly, jerky and panicking. She tried to hear the sounds of the crowd outside the Palatium – or, who knew, perhaps even *inside* by now – but there was only the sterile chatter of these machine men, the godless Taskmasters who professed themselves creatures of such faith.

She listened for the song of the angels, but in her ears was just the mundane and the mortal. In her nose was only the metal, oil and acid smell of these new skitarii. Had they brought that back from the outer worlds they'd been banished to? For a moment her imagination seemed to drop off a cliff inside her head, falling into a void unpopulated by angels, the spaces where these soldiers had gone. A universe of orbital mechanics and turning spheres and no wonder whatsoever, where they took children from their families and made them into automata with no volition of their own, more cogs in the vast engine that was the vastness of the Imperium. And their red-robed clergy sang hymns about how majestic it all was and yet the idea – the *revelation* – lanced her through like a blade. She stumbled, and couldn't get to her feet even when the alpha hauled on her arm, so he was left staring down at her blankly as she trembled and shuddered.

The thought, *What if we are just tainted by the xenos?* was replaced by the

still more fearsome, *What if there's nothing? What if there's nothing but this, and the turning of gears forever and forever?* No Many-Handed Emperor, no angels, no Blessed Union. A lifetime of servitude.

'Get up,' the alpha instructed her, and she tried, but right then there wasn't an iota of strength in her.

'What did you see?' she whispered, when he bent close. 'When they sent you from the world, what was there?' She couldn't ask, *Did you see angels?* but somehow she hoped for it.

And the question seemed to baffle him. He yanked on her arm mechanically, and she found herself clinging to him, staring into the darkness within his helm.

'Please,' she whispered. 'Is there something more than this? They took you from here, Morod, where they feed you to the factories and the furnaces and the mines, and the last service you can give is that you're another piece of fuel for their fires. If there are no angels, at least tell me there's more, up there. On other worlds. In the void. In the *warp* even. Tell me.'

He restored her to her feet, oddly delicate, but then perhaps Triskellian had told him not to hurt her, and he was a slave to his orders.

'The universe is empty.' She hadn't really expected an answer, but there it was. 'There is only the work.'

'And what is the work for?'

'For the greater glory of the Omnissiah.' Vacant rote words from a hollow man.

He wasn't trying to move her forwards just yet, but she wrestled with him as if he was. 'Do you believe that? Or is that just their words in your mouth? Did they cut away the parts of you that could believe?'

For a moment he just regarded her blankly, but then his voice came again, quiet and pensive. 'There are only terrible things that we must not listen to. That is why we pray to the Omnissiah. So we cannot hear the rest.'

'What rest?' she demanded. 'What is there to hear?'

'I prayed,' said the alpha, 'and heard only the prayer, and so I cannot say. But they tell me it is terrible.'

Then they were moving off again, and she was going with them whether she wanted to or not. Her only choice was if she wanted to arrive with her arm still in its socket.

They came to Triskellian, up in one of the viewing chambers and surrounded by death. The skitarii just marched right in, scattering pieces of their fallen comrades as they did, and that meant Davien had no chance to brace herself against the sight either.

At least six dead skitarii, and in the centre of the room the great corpse of the Fabricator General, lying on his rounded side. And Sakiri. Davien cried out to see her there, curled up about her charred wounds, her mission finally accomplished. Save that Davien knew Burzulem had never been the real enemy. Triskellian was the danger, and he was whole and well and watching a splash of ancient viewscreens. She saw the banners of her people there. She saw them packed in shoulder to shoulder before the Palatium, shouting, fighting, crushed in as the veteran skitarii formed ranks to trap them there, awaiting the word.

‘You’ve been busy, little clerk.’ Triskellian had Doctor Tesling up there with him, a metal hand pinching the smaller man’s shoulder. ‘You did your best to betray me, but then of course you did. And in the end, look how it all turned out. Your accomplice has tragically killed the Fabricator General. How fortunate for Morod’s wellbeing that I’m ready to ascend to the post, effective immediately. Fitting, given what day it is.’

‘Niem is dead,’ she said, and saw Tesling shudder and sag in the man’s grip. Triskellian himself, of course, didn’t even understand who she meant. ‘And Sakiri...’ She wanted to go to the dead woman, but the alpha’s hold wouldn’t let her. ‘And...’ Her eyes were unable to stay away from the vista on the screen. She saw people she knew there: family and fellow Congregation faithful, the organisers of the mine and factorum worker gangs, everyone she’d grown up with. Who’d have thought there would be so many who would rise up to march on the Palatium. And yet the skitarii had them boxed in now, trapped in the grounds of the very building they’d come to assault.

‘That’s right,’ Triskellian told her. ‘It’s over now. A regrettable incident in the history of Morod, which the annals will record was put down by a humble servant of the Omnissiah, just one more simple defender of the faith.’

‘Faith!’ she shouted at him. ‘You’re hollow! You have no faith!’ And she tried to spring at him, but the skitarius might as well have been a statue for all her struggles could shift him. ‘You can’t imagine faith! *I* have faith! I

believe! In the Emperor's angels and the Blessed Union. They'll come to take us up. It's *our* ascension, not yours!' And even as she started saying it, she wasn't sure she believed it. But then the sneer came to the living parts of Triskellian's face and he stalked down from the viewscreens, kicking his way through the spilled components of Burzulem's last moments.

'You and all your kin are nothing but the spawn of xenos,' he told her flatly. 'Your angels are just hungry monsters from the void. Your "Many-Handed Emperor" is some alien beast that crept onto Morod and infected humanity here with its taint. And that is foul. But what is worse than foul – what is truly *sad* – is that so many of you do indeed seem to *believe* in this fable you've made for yourselves. That anything in the universe even *cares* what happens to creatures like you. Can you not *see*,' and he was right before her, gripping her chin painfully even as Tesling squirmed in the steel hold of his other hand, 'how *pathetic* you are?'

It was that sneer that unlocked the fire in her. It was those words, dripping with contempt. She spat at him and tried to bite his fingers, and when he whipped them out of reach she found that somehow all the doubt in her had been transmuted. Doubt would be giving him the satisfaction. Let doubt have her, and the universe really would be just a thing of grinding wheels and people being crushed between them. And, doubt banished, she found she did have faith after all.

'I believe,' she told his incredulous face. 'The angels will deliver us from your work. They shall take us into themselves and carry us into a universe of life and joy. No more work, no more suffering.' She felt a great swelling within her, and it was pure wonder that she had never really believed before, not quite. But now everything else had fled her, faith was all that remained. It expanded to fill all the hollow places the pain and doubt and weariness had left.

'We shall know joy,' she told Triskellian, and now *she* had *him* by the front of his robes, and he clumsily tried to prise her fingers away, metal hand juddering and twitching. 'We were promised that the Emperor would send His angels across all the wastes of the void. Through the terrors of the warp they will come to us, because they love us and they want us to be one with them. And I *believe* in their love more than I believe in your machines. Because you have nothing, adept! Your gears circle about a hollow centre.' Her breath caught, even as he freed himself and stumbled back. 'And I hear

the song of the angels, adept. They love me. They will come to me, if they must cross all the dark spaces between the stars. I *believe* in the Blessed Union.’ And right then, for her tiny audience, she was as much of a demagogue as Claress ever had been, and Tesling echoed ‘the Blessed Union’ after her, eyes shining with faith.

Triskellian feared her, in that moment, she saw. He was putting distance between them as though her weak, organic hands might tear away all the metal he hid behind. But then he remembered his place and was signalling to the alpha.

‘Have her held. Her execution as a traitor will serve as a signal to the people of Auctorites that this episode is over. And move in on the mob. Keep killing them until there’s none left bearing arms. If they are so faithful, then beat it out of them until they beg to go back to the factories.’

OceanofPDF.com

15

He felt shaken, he had to admit. Who'd have thought the little vermin of a clerk would have such a turn of rhetoric? But useless, all of it useless, Triskellian assured himself. The last embers of a fire he was even now stamping on. And after that? The dregs of her gene-line would be nothing but a resource he would use to build his better skitarii. To make his modest but significant contribution to the workings of the universal machine. For the greater glory of the Omnissiah.

Ten-Tangram had braced himself to haul her away but she strained against him. 'I hear them, priest,' she spat. 'And they hear us. They hear and they come for us!'

Triskellian rounded on her despite himself. 'You had better hope,' he snarled, 'no – you had better *pray* that isn't true. Because if it ever were—'

'When I was a child, I thought I heard a voice.'

Triskellian's jaw moved and twitched a couple of times as he tried to process that, because the words hadn't been Davien's or even Tesling's. Ten-Tangram had spoken out of turn, and that was so unexpected that he felt as though some ancient mechanism in the floor or walls had suddenly spoken up.

'Run error diagnostics, alpha primus,' he snapped irritably.

'But they took me away.' Ten-Tangram was not looking at him, or at Davien, or anything, really. 'And they remade me, and each time they cut away a part of me, it was as though there was a new door closed between me and the voice I heard.'

Triskellian was already linking into the man's neural architecture, because he had done a lot of work reconfiguring the command hierarchies in Ten-

Tangram, and this sounded like some kind of recursive logic loop he would need to tug straight.

‘And when I was dormant, in the ships, awaiting deployment, they told me I would not dream,’ Ten-Tangram’s flat voice ground on relentlessly. ‘But I dreamt I was lost in a great complex of many rooms and engines, and somewhere someone was calling for me but they were in a chamber hidden away and I could never find them. And I called for them, but they could not hear me. And I remembered, in those dreams, what it was like before they remade me, and the voices, singing.’

Everyone was very still now – Triskellian, as he searched through his connections with the alpha, and Davien and Tesling, just... still. Just listening.

‘And I forgot, in the end. In the cold years of the void. In the hot years of the war. They took me away from my home and remade me and had me fight, and I forgot the voice. I thought it had gone. I thought it was a fault within me.’ His helm tilted until its blank gaze was on Davien. ‘I remember now. Your words have opened those doors in me.’

She looked almost apologetic for it, writhing beneath his stare.

‘Alpha, you have orders,’ Triskellian told him, hoping that would jump-start the man’s proper routines. He was still wrestling with the command structures he had imposed, finding them intact within themselves, yet curiously detached from the man himself. *Shoddy workmanship. What’s gone on here?*

‘They sang to me,’ Ten-Tangram said, his voice very quiet now, ‘and I had forgotten, but you have woken the memories in me.’ He sounded filled with wonder and that was very much not something a skitarius should be capable of.

‘I’ve changed my mind,’ Triskellian said. ‘Kill her. Kill her now. Put your pistol to her forehead now.’ *Why is everything suddenly so difficult?* ‘Draw your pistol – unbutton your holster first. Draw your pistol from it. Extend your arm until the barrel of the pistol touches the forehead of the prisoner.’ He was walking the man through the exercise like some grotesque piece of puppetry, pulling on inner strings in Ten-Tangram’s mind.

And there, it had worked, though it was hardly an efficient way to run an army. Hopefully when the girl was dead this unexpected glitch in the workings would be smoothed out and he could carry on.

Davien had her chin up, staring up the line of the gun, up the line of Ten-Tangram's arm, a martyr in the making, save that nobody would ever care.

'Pull the trigger,' Triskellian prompted. 'Do I really have to spell it out for you, alpha primus? Pull. The. Trigger.' His imagination bridged the gap of the next few seconds, visualising the arc pistol discharging, the girl's head a brief electric fireball before becoming nothing but drifting ash. A fate she'd most certainly earned with this latest piece of nonsense.

And yet no trigger was pulled, and he hauled himself back into the command structures in Ten-Tangram's hardware, determined to rewrite them entirely if need be, shortcut any inconvenient organic connections that might be misfiring, make a direct link from command input to trigger finger if that was necessary. They gave beneath his virtual fingers. It was as though he had placed his weight on a plascrete floor only to have it crumble and give like soft sand. Suddenly the whole tottering structure of logic had no foundation. The flesh it was built on shifted and squirmed, and it was all coming down, flaking away, rusting to dust. Triskellian heard himself make a noise, revulsion and horror mingled.

Ten-Tangram knelt.

'Magus,' he said.

'I'm...' Davien seemed as thrown by this as Triskellian. 'I'm not a magus.'

'You have brought me back to myself,' the skitarius said. 'You have given me back who I was born to be. You are the Emperor's voice. Through you, I hear His angels once again.'

And Doctor Tesling snickered. Triskellian whirled on the cringing little man furiously and found him... not cringing; not even seeming so little, any more.

'We never knew if it would survive,' the doctor said, creeping crabwise about the room to stay clear of Triskellian's steel grasp, to approach Davien and Ten-Tangram. 'The truth in them. The blood. But you came with your conscription pool so many times, eating away at our strength. You came collecting, and what could we do? We tried to hide our children each time but you caught us unawares too often, or hunted out our nurseries. And we had to protect the Aunts and the Uncles from your eyes, and so we offered up our children. Every generation impoverished, so that we never grew into what the angels intended. You took them, our beautiful infants, the hope of

our future, and remade them in fire and steel. I always wondered whether it would be the metal that would triumph, or the flesh. What we are is written into each cell of our bodies. What we are, that calls out to our divine makers. I wondered if you would ever cut deeply enough to rid your soldiers of that. And you should rejoice, adept. How right you have been. How this validates your theories! Because life in the galaxy is war and hardship, but of all your metal soldiers, who has endured to come back home to Morod? Those who carry the divine bloodline within them – the blood that allows them to endure more than poor human flesh could, even through all the surgeries and alterations of your order. You have proof of your hypothesis at last! Save that you were mistaken about which flesh would triumph.’

‘No,’ Triskellian got out. ‘That is not. Not what I meant.’

‘You took our bloodline and our voice and scattered it across your worlds, generation after generation,’ Tesling said earnestly, as though he was genuinely congratulating Triskellian. ‘All those conscription pools, all those Ascension Days. All those Morod skitarii on your many worlds. All of them, just waiting to be reminded of the angels’ call.’

‘No,’ Triskellian repeated. He had no arguments to back up the negative but he couldn’t let this go unchallenged.

‘But you should be rejoicing in the yes, adept,’ Tesling told him. ‘This is what you wanted, isn’t it? The merging of our strength and yours. The creation of a strain of soldier that will endure and adapt and prevail, beyond the weaknesses of your usual Hollow Men. You just didn’t know that the experiment had already run its course, and been a success. Neither did I, until this moment. But, as a fellow man of science, I am sure you will celebrate with me that we have husbanded our hybrid army to a reality. Although you will not be able to write your thesis upon it for your order’s archives, I am afraid. Alpha primus, is it? Do you feel the faith in you now?’

‘I do,’ Ten-Tangram replied, as Triskellian stumbled away from all of them, feeling the cracked screens at his back.

‘Do you hear the song of the angels?’

‘I do.’

‘Do you sing back to them, in your heart, so that they might hear you across all the void of space and come to your call?’

‘I do.’

‘Then now is the time. Kill the tech-priest.’

Ten-Tangram’s helm turned to stare at Triskellian, who felt a jolt of hostile contact as he met its dark viewslit. He was still scrabbling at the insides of the man’s head, and there was *something* down there, staring up at him. Something malevolent and cunning and utterly inhuman. It looked out at him through the man’s genetic inheritance, across however many generations of patient lurking.

‘No!’ he said again, and Ten-Tangram echoed him.

‘No.’

Tesling was nonplussed. ‘But... he is an enemy of the faith. One of the great oppressors.’

‘Yes,’ the alpha said. ‘But it is not my place to end him. It is hers.’ And he pressed the gun into Davien’s hand.

The little clerk – and she, too, suddenly no longer seemed so little, so insignificant, as she had before. She looked at the weapon, and then at Triskellian.

‘You’re making a mistake,’ he told her hoarsely. ‘The things you want to call out to. They will consume you. They’re not angels. They’re monsters.’

Her face was beatifically calm when she answered him. ‘What makes you think,’ she said, ‘that they are two different things?’

She levelled the pistol, artless, clumsy with it. Triskellian was retreating, casting about for escape and seeing the banks of viewscreens. On their faces, he could see the red lines of Ten-Tangram’s troops pulling back, releasing their iron hold on the mob. He could see them breaking from their orderly formations, mingling with the rioters like little drops of blood being swept up in a flood. And the insurrectionists accepted them; they knew their own.

‘Impossible,’ he whimpered, the enormity of it swamping him. *How many generations? How many legions of corrupted soldiers are out there? How far have we spread their taint?*

He looked back down the barrel of the pistol.

‘No,’ he tried, one last time. ‘I have to make things right. I have to fix things. There’s still time.’

‘Your kind never fix anything,’ she said. ‘You just spread the brokenness. Sometimes you have to tear everything down to make it better.’ And then

the arc pistol seared out its blue-white fire, and that was the end of him.

OceanofPDF.com

16

The fall of Auctorites set a fire that blazed across the surface of Morod, as though it had been the sole supporting scaffolding all the Adeptus Mechanicus administration across the planet had been leaning on. All their faultless mathematical precision crumbling, breaking apart before the great upswelling of protest and hatred. All those far-scattered centres of population: the cities, the work-camps, the mines; red-coated priests and overseers being dragged from their prayer, whips and clubs and electro-prods grappled from metal hands, cyborg pieces torn from flesh. Davien had seen pict.

Four weeks, now, past Ascension Day, and the last throes of revolution were sweeping the furthest reaches of Morod. The final enclaves of the Hollow Men were being gutted. And some of them went calmly, accepting what was happening to them as the sole solution to the unpalatable equation the insurrection represented. Others fought tooth and nail, or detonated their places and secrets in explosions of appalling power, felt across the crust of the world. It didn't matter. What mattered was that they were gone. Sometimes it was the hands of the faithful who did away with them, and sometimes it was merely those whom they had brutalised and worked to an early grave. Those who might not have heard the call of the Congregation if they had ever been treated like human beings rather than components in a machine. And Davien knew it didn't matter who was responsible for each victory. The Emperor's angels would accept them all.

Today, Claress had called Davien to her, in her new seat of authority in the Palatium, or those parts of it still standing. She had found a chapel of the tech-priests, which the Congregation had decked out with all their banners

and symbols. There were new paintings of the Many-Handed Emperor on the walls, childlike faithful thronging at His feet with adoring expressions. And His angels, scattering from all those sharp-fingered hands, raining upon the chosen like jagged stars. Davien had come here to worship and pray. To sing, so that the voices of the Congregation could ripple out through the twisted fabric of space to reach the angels and draw them close.

And they were coming. She had heard the echo of them as she proselytised to Ten-Tangram; as she confronted Triskellian. Now their voices filled her dreams, inhuman and vast and inexpressibly beautiful. They were the antithesis of the dead creed of the tech-priests. The voices of the angels were *life*, thriving and growing, moving forwards, not looking back. Life and energy and movement and a joy in their own existence. And, after long generations, they were returning to their lost children on Morod, closer every day.

She had been out of the Auctorites conurbation for a few days, riding along with Fomoran, chasing fugitive tech-priests out in the barren, toxic waste that was most of Morod's surface. She had only come back at Claress' summons, and found the whole of the city transformed. There were banners strung across the streets with a hundred different interpretations of the Many-Handed Emperor, and she heard bustle and chatter and voices raised in song. The factories had stilled and the forges had gone cold, and nobody toiled in the mines. Auctorites seemed to exist in a state of perpetual holiday. Save for one part of it.

Even as she approached the Palatium, with its breached wall, she saw the ships lifting off. For a moment her heart was in her mouth, thinking something had gone wrong. Were the last of the Hollow Men escaping somehow? Had the void dock fallen to some counter-insurgency from the tech-priests? Was there to be bombardment and horror, everything they'd won torn from them at the last moment? But nobody around her seemed alarmed; this was a part of their day, nothing new.

And when she came to Claress it was not as part of some grand service to a room full of the faithful, it was just the old woman and Doctor Tesling and the skitarii alpha, Ten-Tangram. Just the four of them in that grand, echoing chamber that had once been the Fabricator General's audience hall.

'Magus,' Davien asked her, 'why are the ships leaving?'

'Ten-Tangram's followers must return to their fellows up above.' Claress

was sitting on the steps of the dais, staff across her knees. Old as she was, when the city had been taken Davien had seen her with a new lease of life, striding through the crowds like a prophet finally honoured in her own country. She patted the cracked stone beside her and Davien sat. Ten-Tangram stood nearby, in his ramrod way, waiting to be told what to do because old habits died hard. Doctor Tesling had had a plasteel chair hauled in from somewhere and was sitting there with one leg crossed over the other, cataloguing the contents of his medical case intently. Something, Davien felt, was up.

‘But they should be down here,’ Davien suggested. ‘With all of us, for the Ascension.’ Not the tech-priests’ vacant festival, but the true Ascension, when the angels would come and take them all to their final reward.

‘You have heard the song,’ Claress said quietly.

‘Yes.’

‘You know that they will be with us soon. That all we have lived for, all these long generations, is finally coming to its blessed end.’ A few tears leaked from the corners of her eyes, weaving their way through her webs of wrinkles. ‘I have held out, Davien. I have been strong in my faith. And now I will look upon His angels with my own eyes, and know bliss.’ For a moment, the thought seemed too much for her to contain, the presence of Davien and the others fading away completely as she confronted the miraculous, inside her head. ‘But the way of the faithful is one of sacrifice, Davien. Before us, there have been many who have given of themselves, so that the faith could be nurtured and maintained. So that we might survive, and call the angels to a world made ready for their coming. Do you understand?’

‘Of course, magus.’

‘Then you must understand that these sacrifices do not end just because the true time of ascension has come to Morod.’

Davien did *not* understand, looking blankly at Claress.

‘The Imperium is vast, little one,’ the magus told her. ‘A thousand thousand worlds spread out across the void, and each one knows only fear and misery and darkness. Each one is home to people who live brutal, short lives beneath the heel of their own Taskmasters. And they live those lives in ignorance, for the only faith they have to guide them is the sterile creed of the Hollow Men, or another false doctrine given to them by those for whom

they toil. There is a universe of suffering and blindness out there, Davien. And we have a duty. That is the word of the Many-Handed Emperor. That is the word of His angels. We have won our joyous victory here on Morod, but the work is not yet done. That is why Ten-Tangram is returning to his ships in orbit up above. And that is why the children taken by the conscription pool must go, too. Because they are our children. Because they carry our blood. They are to become machine-soldiers, or be assigned to the mortal armies of the false Emperor. They will scatter across all the worlds of humanity. And they will carry our message in their hearts and our blood in their veins. Because Ten-Tangram came back to us, despite all the torments they put him through. You awoke the song of the angels in him, and showed us that we are stronger than all their steel. The blood of the Congregation cannot be mastered.'

'But he won't be taken by the angels,' Davien objected. 'And the children... Don't they deserve to be a part of the Blessed Union?'

'They do, and we are denying them,' Claress said heavily. 'But our duty is to spread the word of the faith beyond this single world. And that is why they must carry our message with them, in their hearts and in the cells of their bodies. And that is why you and Tesling must go with them too.'

Davien felt as though a hand clenched about her insides: a metal hand, like one of the priests' steel claws. 'Magus—'

'Because they will forget. They will need teachers, to remind them of who and what they are. You must go into the universe, the two of you who are strong with our blood and yet do not show it in your faces. You must bring the Emperor's true message to the Hollow Men. You will take with you some of the oldest Great-Great-Aunts and Uncles. They will spread their own message, on each world you come to. And you will teach our children what it is to be faithful, even as the Hollow Men teach them how to fight. You will be a magus in your own right and the Congregation will flower on every planet that you visit. But the Blessed Union will be denied you as well. That is the price demanded of you, Davien. I am sorry. I hope one day you will be like me: old, and glad, and triumphant, and ready at last to join the angels.'

'But I want to be here with you,' whispered Davien. 'I've earned the Union, haven't I? I did the right things, didn't I?'

Claress' withered arm slipped about her shoulders and hugged her close. 'I

am so sorry, child, but these tasks fall upon those shoulders strong enough to bear them. Your service to the Congregation is not ended just yet, and your life will be filled with struggle. But you will save whole worlds for the angels, and that is no small thing. You will be a magus among magi, the great leader of the faith. Countless voices will remember you in their prayers, and yet I weep for you, for the price you must pay for it, and the rewards you may never know.'

She had never gone off-planet before, of course. It was all a chaos of noise and shuddering, the air within the cramped hold twisting and hammering at her ears as though it was a living thing trying to escape by any means possible. The ship fought the avarice of Morod's hungry gravity, and for the longest time she thought it would fail and come crashing back down. She put her hands over her ears and drew her knees up to her chin and listened inside her head. The song of the angels calmed her. It was very clear now, and as they rose higher, it became louder and louder. Countless alien voices together in a weird, thrilling harmony, eager and jubilant. She looked over at Doctor Tesling, clutching his bag to him, and his head was tilted back, goggled eyes staring at nothing. She knew he was listening to the same chorus.

And then the thunder ceased and she knew they were out of the worst of the atmosphere, clawing their way into orbit. One of Ten-Tangram's people came and asked them to join the alpha on the ship's bridge.

'You should see this,' his flat voice said as they entered. There were windows here. Or perhaps they were screens, Davien wasn't sure. They were looking out across the brown and craggy curve of Morod, into the vast blackness of space. Except she'd always been told space was empty, and what she saw now was thronging with life.

The angels didn't look as she'd expected. Nothing like the radiant humanlike forms she'd sometimes seen depicted, although some of them were a bit like the toothed stars of the chapel images. And vast. She had no real basis for comparison but she understood they must be vast, all those undulating lengths of spines and fins and wings and bristling jaws. They had come, even as she was being taken away from them. And she wept, as Claress had wept, because they were radiant. They were hideous, monstrous to the eye, but to the blood within her they spoke only of an alien yet

perfect beauty.

Their countless jagged maws were gaping, and she saw them disgorge a great rain of smaller shapes that descended upon the planet below, and *that* was just as she'd imagined. Just as it had been painted so many times, they were scattering their children across the face of Morod in their hungry thousands. The time of Blessed Union had come, and all the faithful – *everyone* on Morod – would be taken up to become one with the angels, to live forever on their endless devouring pilgrimage through the universe.

And Davien was denied it. She could only stare out at the reward that should have been hers and steel herself to her new duty. She would go amongst the ignorant. She would shepherd the scions of the divine blood and teach them what it was to bear their mark and their destiny. She would spread the touch of the angels across the human Imperium and prepare new worlds for the coming of the Many-Handed Emperor. And maybe, when she was old and spent, if she was very lucky, the ravenous angels might one day come for her.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adrian Tchaikovsky is the author of the acclaimed ten-book Shadows of the Apt series, and many other novels, novellas and short stories including *Children of Time* (which won the Arthur C. Clarke award in 2016) and its sequel, *Children of Ruin* (which won the British Science Fiction Award in 2020). He lives in Leeds in the UK and his hobbies include entomology and board and role-playing games. His first story for Black Library was 'Raised in Darkness'.

OceanofPDF.com

An extract from *Dawn of Fire: Avenging Son*.



OceanofPDF.com

‘I was there at the Siege of Terra,’ Vitrian Messinius would say in his later years.

‘I was there...’ he would add to himself, his words never meant for ears but his own. ‘I was there the day the Imperium died.’

But that was yet to come.

‘To the walls! To the walls! The enemy is coming!’ Captain Messinius, as he was then, led his Space Marines across the Penitent’s Square high up on the Lion’s Gate. ‘Another attack! Repel them! Send them back to the warp!’

Thousands of red-skinned monsters born of fear and sin scaled the outer ramparts, fury and murder incarnate. The mortals they faced quailed. It took the heart of a Space Marine to stand against them without fear, and the Angels of Death were in short supply.

‘Another attack, move, move! To the walls!’

They came in the days after the Avenging Son returned, emerging from nothing, eight legions strong, bringing the bulk of their numbers to bear against the chief entrance to the Imperial Palace. A decapitation strike like no other, and it came perilously close to success.

Messinius’ Space Marines ran to the parapet edging the Penitent’s Square. On many worlds, the square would have been a plaza fit to adorn the centre of any great city. Not on Terra. On the immensity of the Lion’s Gate, it was nothing, one of hundreds of similarly huge spaces. The word ‘gate’ did not suit the scale of the cityscape. The Lion’s Gate’s bulk marched up into the sky, step by titanic step, until it rose far higher than the mountains it had supplanted. The gate had been built by the Emperor Himself, they said. Myths detailed the improbable supernatural feats required to raise it. They were lies, all of them, and belittled the true effort needed to build such an

edifice. Though the Lion's Gate was made to His design and by His command, the soaring monument had been constructed by mortals, with mortal hands and mortal tools. Messinius wished that had been remembered. For men to build this was far more impressive than any godly act of creation. If men could remember that, he believed, then perhaps they would remember their own strength.

The uncanny may not have built the gate, but it threatened to bring it down. Messinius looked over the rampart lip, down to the lower levels thousands of feet below and the spread of the Anterior Barbican.

Upon the stepped fortifications of the Lion's Gate was armour of every colour and the blood of every loyal primarch. Dozens of regiments stood alongside them. Aircraft filled the sky. Guns boomed from every quarter. In the churning redness on the great roads, processional ways so huge they were akin to prairies cast in rockcrete, were flashes of gold where the Emperor's Custodian Guard battled. The might of the Imperium was gathered there, in the palace where He dwelt.

There seemed moments on that day when it might not be enough.

The outer ramparts were carpeted in red bodies that writhed and heaved, obscuring the great statues adorning the defences and covering over the guns, an invasive cancer consuming reality. The enemy were legion. There were too many foes to defeat by plan and ruse. Only guns, and will, would see the day won, but the defenders were so pitifully few.

Messinius called a wordless halt, clenched fist raised, seeking the best place to deploy his mixed company, veterans all of the Terran Crusade. Gunships and fighters sped overhead, unleashing deadly light and streams of bombs into the packed daemonic masses. There were innumerable cannons crammed onto the gate, and they all fired, rippling the structure with false earthquakes. Soon the many ships and orbital defences of Terra would add their guns, targeting the very world they were meant to guard, but the attack had come so suddenly; as yet they had had no time to react.

The noise was horrendous. Messinius' audio dampers were at maximum and still the roar of ordnance stung his ears. Those humans that survived today would be rendered deaf. But he would have welcomed more guns, and louder still, for all the defensive fury of the assailed palace could not drown out the hideous noise of the daemons – their sighing hisses, a billion serpents strong, and chittering, screaming wails. It was not only heard but

sensed within the soul, the realms of spirit and of matter were so intertwined. Messinius' being would be forever stained by it.

Tactical information scrolled down his helmlate, near environs only. He had little strategic overview of the situation. The vox-channels were choked with a hellish screaming that made communication impossible. The noosphere was disrupted by etheric backwash spilling from the immaterial rifts the daemons poured through. Messinius was used to operating on his own. Small-scale, surgical actions were the way of the Adeptus Astartes, but in a battle of this scale, a lack of central coordination would lead inevitably to defeat. This was not like the first Siege, where his kind had fought in Legions.

He called up a company-wide vox-cast and spoke to his warriors. They were not his Chapter-kin, but they would listen. The primarch himself had commanded that they do so.

'Reinforce the mortals,' he said. 'Their morale is wavering. Position yourselves every fifty yards. Cover the whole of the south-facing front. Let them see you.' He directed his warriors by chopping at the air with his left hand. His right, bearing an inactive power fist, hung heavily at his side. 'Assault Squad Antiocles, back forty yards, single firing line. Prepare to engage enemy breakthroughs only on my mark. Devastators, split to demi-squads and take up high ground, sergeant and sub-squad prime's discretion as to positioning and target. Remember our objective, heavy infliction of casualties. We kill as many as we can, we retreat, then hold at the Penitent's Arch until further notice. Command squad, with me.'

Command squad was too grand a title for the mismatched crew Messinius had gathered around himself. His own officers were light years away, if they still lived.

'Doveskamor, Tidominus,' he said to the two Aurora Marines with him. 'Take the left.'

'Yes, captain,' they voxed, and jogged away, their green armour glinting orange in the hell-light of the invasion.

The rest of his scratch squad was comprised of a communications specialist from the Death Spectres, an Omega Marine with a penchant for plasma weaponry, and a Raptor holding an ancient standard he'd taken from a dusty display.

'Why did you take that, Brother Kryvesh?' Messinius asked, as they

moved forward.

‘The palace is full of such relics,’ said the Raptor. ‘It seems only right to put them to use. No one else wanted it.’

Messinius stared at him.

‘What? If the gate falls, we’ll have more to worry about than my minor indiscretion. It’ll be good for morale.’

The squads were splitting to join the standard humans. Such was the noise many of the men on the wall had not noticed their arrival, and a ripple of surprise went along the line as they appeared at their sides. Messinius was glad to see they seemed more firm when they turned their eyes back outwards.

‘Anzigus,’ he said to the Death Spectre. ‘Hold back, facilitate communication within the company. Maximum signal gain. This interference will only get worse. See if you can get us patched in to wider theatre command. I’ll take a hardline if you can find one.’

‘Yes, captain,’ said Anzigus. He bowed a helm that was bulbous with additional equipment. He already had the access flap of the bulky vox-unit on his arm open. He withdrew, the aerials on his power plant extending. He headed towards a systems nexus on the far wall of the plaza, where soaring buttresses pushed back against the immense weight bearing down upon them.

Messinius watched him go. He knew next to nothing about Anzigus. He spoke little, and when he did, his voice was funereal. His Chapter was mysterious, but the same lack of familiarity held true for many of these warriors, thrown together by miraculous events. Over their years lost wandering in the warp, Messinius had come to see some as friends as well as comrades, others he hardly knew, and none he knew so well as his own Chapter brothers. But they would stand together. They were Space Marines. They had fought by the returned primarch’s side, and in that they shared a bond. They would not stint in their duty now.

Messinius chose a spot on the wall, directing his other veterans to left and right. Kryvesh he sent to the mortal officer’s side. He looked down again, out past the enemy and over the outer palace. Spires stretched away in every direction. Smoke rose from all over the landscape. Some of it was new, the work of the daemon horde, but Terra had been burning for weeks. The Astronomican had failed. The galaxy was split in two. Behind them in

the sky turned the great palace gyre, its deep eye marking out the throne room of the Emperor Himself.

‘Sir!’ A member of the Palatine Guard shouted over the din. He pointed downwards, to the left. Messinius followed his wavering finger. Three hundred feet below, daemons were climbing. They came upwards in a triangle tipped by a brute with a double rack of horns. It clambered hand over hand, far faster than should be possible, flying upwards, as if it touched the side of the towering gate only as a concession to reality. A Space Marine with claw locks could not have climbed that fast.

‘Soldiers of the Imperium! The enemy is upon us!’

He looked to the mortals. Their faces were blanched with fear. Their weapons shook. Their bravery was commendable nonetheless. Not one of them attempted to run, though a wave of terror preceded the unnatural things clambering up towards them.

‘We shall not turn away from our duty, no matter how fearful the foe, or how dire our fates may be,’ he said. ‘Behind us is the Sanctum of the Emperor Himself. As He has watched over you, now it is your turn to stand in guardianship over Him.’

The creatures were drawing closer. Through a sliding, magnified window on his display, Messinius looked into the yellow and cunning eyes of their leader. A long tongue lolled permanently from the thing’s mouth, licking at the wall, tasting the terror of the beings it protected.

Boltgun actions clicked. His men leaned over the parapet, towering over the mortals as the Lion’s Gate towered over the Ultimate Wall. A wealth of targeting data was exchanged, warrior to warrior, as each chose a unique mark. No bolt would be wasted in the opening fusillade. They could hear the creatures’ individual shrieks and growls, all wordless, but their meaning was clear: blood, blood, blood. Blood and skulls.

Messinius sneered at them. He ignited his power fist with a swift jerk. He always preferred the visceral thrill of manual activation. Motors came to full life. Lightning crackled around it. He aimed downwards with his bolt pistol. A reticule danced over diabolical faces, each a copy of all the others. These things were not real. They were not alive. They were projections of a false god. The Librarian Atramo had named them maladies. A spiritual sickness wearing ersatz flesh.

He reminded himself to be wary. Contempt was as thick as any armour, but

these things were deadly, for all their unreality.

He knew. He had fought the Neverborn many times before.

‘While He lives,’ Messinius shouted, boosting his voxmitter gain to maximal, ‘we stand!’

‘For He of Terra!’ the humans shouted, their battle cry loud enough to be heard over the booming of guns.

‘For He of Terra,’ said Messinius. ‘Fire!’ he shouted.

The Space Marines fired first. Boltguns spoke, spitting spikes of rocket flare into the foe. Bolts slammed into daemon bodies, bursting them apart. Black viscera exploded away. Black ichor showered those coming after. The daemons’ false souls screamed back whence they came, though their bones and offal tumbled down like those of any truly living foe.

Las-beams speared next, and the space between the wall top and the scaling party filled with violence. The daemons were unnaturally resilient, protected from death by the energies of the warp, and though many were felled, others weathered the fire, and clambered up still, unharmed and uncaring of their dead. Messinius no longer needed his helm’s magnification to see into the daemon champion’s eyes. It stared at him, its smile a promise of death. The terror that preceded them was replaced by the urge to violence, and that gripped them all, foe and friend. The baseline humans began to lose their discipline. A man turned and shot his comrade, and was shot down in turn. Kryvesh banged the foot of his borrowed banner and called them back into line. Elsewhere, his warriors sang; not their Chapter warsongs, but battle hymns known to all. Wavering human voices joined them. The feelings of violence abated, just enough.

Then the things were over the parapet and on them. Messinius saw Tidominus carried down by a group of daemons, his unit signum replaced by a mortis rune in his helm. The enemy champion was racing at him. Messinius emptied his bolt pistol into its face, blowing half of it away into a fine mist of daemonichor. Still it leapt, hurling itself twenty feet over the parapet. Messinius fell back, keeping the creature in sight, targeting skating over his helmlate as the machine-spirit tried to maintain a target lock. Threat indicators trilled, shifting up their priority spectrum.

The daemon held up its enormous gnarled hands. Smoke whirled in the space between, coalescing into a two-handed sword almost as tall as Messinius. By the time its hoofed feet cracked the paving slabs of the

square, the creature's weapon was solid. Vapour streaming from its ruined face, it pointed the broadsword at Messinius and hissed a wordless challenge.

'Accepted,' said Messinius, and moved in to attack.

The creature was fast, and punishingly strong. Messinius parried its first strike with an outward push of his palm, fingers spread. Energy crackled. The boom generated by the meeting of human technology and the sorceries of the warp was loud enough to out-compete the guns, but though the impact sent pain lancing up Messinius' arm, the daemon was not staggered, and pressed in a follow-up attack, swinging the massive sword around its head as if it weighed nothing.

Messinius countered more aggressively this time, punching in to the strike. Another thunderous detonation. Disruption fields shattered matter, but the daemon was not wholly real, and the effect upon it was lesser than it would be upon a natural foe. Nevertheless, this time it was thrown backwards by the blow. Smoke poured from the edge of its blade. It licked black blood from its arm and snarled. Messinius was ready when it leapt: opening his fist, ignoring the sword as it clashed against his pauldron and sheared off a peeling of ceramite, he grabbed the beast about its middle.

The Bloodletters of Khorne were rangy things, all bone and ropey muscle, no space within them for organs. The false god of war had no need for them to eat or breathe, or to give the semblance of being able to do so. They were made only to kill, and to strike fear in the hearts of those they faced. Their waists were solid, and slender, and easily encompassed by Messinius' power fist. It squirmed in his grip, throwing Messinius' arm about. Servo motors in his joints locked, supplementary muscle fibres strained, but the White Consul stood firm.

'Tell your master he is not welcome on Terra,' he said. His words were calm, a deliberate defiance of the waves of rage pulsing off the daemon.

He closed his hand.

The daemon's midriff exploded. The top half fell down, still hissing and thrashing. Its sword clanged off the paving and broke into shards, brittle now it was separated from its wielder. They were pieces of the same thing, sword and beast. Apart, the weapon could not survive long.

Messinius cast down the lower portion of the daemon. There were dozens of the things atop the wall, battling with his warriors and the human

soldiery. In the second he paused he saw Doveskamor hacked down as he stood over the body of his brother, pieces of armour bouncing across the ground. He saw a group of Palatine Sentinels corner a daemon with their bayonets. He saw a dozen humans cut down by eldritch swords.

Where the humans kept their distance, their ranged weapons took a toll upon the Neverborn. Where the daemons got among them, they triumphed more often than not, even against his Space Marines. Support fire rained down sporadically from above, its usefulness restricted by the difficulty of picking targets from the swirling melee. At the western edge of the line, the heavy weapons were more telling, knocking daemons off the wall before they crested the parapet and preventing them from circling around the back of the Imperial forces. Only his equipment allowed Messinius to see this. Without the helm feeds of his warriors and the limited access he had to the Lion Gate's auspectoria, he would have been blind, lost in the immediate clash of arms and sprays of blood. He would have remained where he was, fighting. He would not have seen that there were more groups of daemons pouring upwards. He would not have given his order, and then he would have died.

'Squad Antiocles, engage,' he said. He smashed a charging daemon into fragments, yanked another back the instant before it gutted a mortal soldier, and stamped its skull flat, while switching again to his company vox-net. 'All units, fall back to the Penitent's Arch. Take the mortals with you.'

His assault squad fell from the sky on burning jets, kicking daemons down and shooting them with their plasma and bolt pistols. A roar of promethium from a flamer blasted three bloodletters to ash.

'Fall back! Fall back!' Messinius commanded, his words beating time with his blows. 'Assault Squad Antiocles to cover. Devastators maintain overhead fire.'

Squad Antiocles drove the enemy back. Tactical Space Marines were retreating from the parapet, dragging human soldiers with them. An Ultramarine walked backwards past him, firing his bolter one-handed, a wounded member of the Palatine Guard draped over his right shoulder.

'Fall back! Fall back!' Messinius roared. He grabbed a human by the arm and yanked him hard away from the monster trying to slay him, almost throwing him across the square. He pivoted and punched, slamming the man's opponent in the face with a crackling bang that catapulted its broken

corpse over the wall edge. 'Fall back!'

Mortal soldiers broke and ran while Squad Antiocles held off the foe. Telling to begin with, in moments the assault squad's momentum was broken, and again more bloodletters were leaping over the edge of the rampart. The Space Marines fired in retreat, covering each other in pairs as they crossed the square diagonally to the Penitent's Arch. The mortals were getting the idea, running between the Adeptus Astartes and mostly staying out of their fire corridor. With the fight now concentrated around Squad Antiocles, the Devastators were more effective, blasting down the daemons before they could bring their weight of numbers to bear upon Antiocles. Sporadic bursts of fire from the retreating Tactical Marines added to the effect, and for a short period the number of daemons entering the square did not increase.

Messinius tarried a moment, rounding up more of the humans who were either too embattled or deaf to his orders to get out. He reached three still firing over the parapet's edge and pulled them away. A daemon reared over the parapet and he crushed its skull, but a second leapt up and cleaved hard into his fist, and power fled the weapon. Messinius pumped three bolts into its neck, decapitating it. He moved back.

His power fist was ruined. The daemon's cut had sliced right through the ceramite, breaking the power field generator and most of the weapon's strength-boosting apparatus, making it a dead weight. He said a quick thanks to the machine's departed spirit and smashed the top of his bolt pistol against the quick seal release, at the same time disengaging the power feeds by way of neural link. The clamps holding the power fist to his upper arm came loose and it slid to the floor with a clang, leaving his right arm clad in his standard ceramite gauntlet. A century together. A fine weapon. He had no time to mourn it.

'Fall back!' he shouted. 'Fall back to the Penitent's Arch!'

He slammed a fresh clip into his bolt pistol. Squad Antiocles were being pushed back. The Devastators walked their fire closer in to the combat. A heavy bolter blasted half a dozen daemons into stinking meat. A missile blew, lifting more into the air. Messinius fell back himself now, leaving it to the last moment before ordering the Assault Marines to leap from the fray. Their jets ignited, driving back the daemons with washes of flame, and they lifted up over his head, leaving four of their brothers dead on the ground.

Devastator fire hammered down from above. Anti-personnel weapons set into casemates and swivel turrets on the walls joined in, but the daemons mounted higher and higher in a wave of red that flooded over the parapet.

‘Run!’ he shouted at the straggling human soldiery. ‘Run and survive! Your service is not yet done!’

The Penitent’s Arch led from the square onto a wall walk that curved around to another layer of defences. His Space Marines were already making a firing line across the entrance. A gate could be extended across the arch, sealing the walk from the square, but Messinius refrained from requesting it be closed, as the humans were still streaming past the Adeptus Astartes. Kryvesh waved the banner, whirling it through the air to attract the terrified mortals. The Space Marines fired constantly into the mass of daemons sprinting after them, exhausting their ammunition supplies. Shattered false bodies tumbled down, shot from the front and above, yet still they came, overtaking and dismembering the last warriors fleeing away from the parapet.

Squad Antiocles roared through the arch, landing behind their brethren. Messinius passed between them. For a moment he surveyed the tide of coming fury. Endless red-skinned monsters filling the square like a lake of spilled blood, washing over a score of brightly armoured Space Marine corpses left behind in the retreat. Several hundred humans lay alongside them.

He opened a vox-channel to Gate Command.

‘Wall batteries three-seven-three through three-seven-six, target sector nine five eighty-three, Penitent’s Square, western edge. Five-minute bombardment.’

‘On whose order?’

‘Captain Vitrian Messinius, White Consuls Chapter, Tenth Company. I have the primarch’s authority.’ As he dealt with gunnery control, he was also datapulsing a request for resupply, and checking through layered data screeds.

‘Voice print and signum ident match. Transponder codes valid. We obey.’

The far side of the square erupted in a wall of flame. Heavy cannon shells detonated in a string along the rampart. High-energy beams sliced into the square, turning stone and metal instantly to superheated gas. The approaching daemons were annihilated. A few bolt-rounds cracked off as

the last daemons nearing the Space Marine line were put down.

‘Company, cease fire. Conserve ammunition.’ Nobody heard him. Nobody could. He re-sent the order via vox-script. The boltguns cut out.

Penitent’s Square was a cauldron of fire so intense he could feel the heat through his battleplate’s ceramite. The ground shook under his feet and he considered the possibility that the wall would give way. The noise was so all-consuming the idea of speech lost relevance. For five minutes the Lion’s Gate tore madly at its own hide, ripping out chunks of itself in a bid to scrape free the parasites infesting its fabric, then, as suddenly as it had begun, the bombardment ceased.

Where the Penitent’s Square had been, a twisted mass of black metal and shattered stone remained. So formidable were the defences of the Lion’s Gate that the structure beneath had not been penetrated, but it was like this, in small bursts of destruction, that they could lose this war.

Messinius accessed the gate’s noosphere. No daemons had as yet rounded the projecting Penitent’s Spur to come up against their new position. When the attack came again, which it would, it would come from the front.

An ammunition train raced down the walkway from the fortress interior and came to a squealing stop fifty yards away. Medicae personnel jumped down. A Space Marine Apothecary came with them. Human peons rushed about with heavy sack bags full of bolter magazines, passing them out to the transhumans. Spent magazines clattered to the floor. New ones were slammed home. Messinius contacted his squad leaders, taking a quick census of his surviving men, not trusting the digits that read ‘Company Casualties 23%’ blinking in the upper right of his visual field.

Through the smoke given off by burning metal on the far side of the ruined square, he saw movement. Auspex returns tripped his armour’s machine-spirit, and it blinked warnings in his helm.

<threat detected.>

‘They’re coming again,’ he said.

‘My lord?’ A soft voice, one that did not belong in that moment. He ignored it.

‘Engage at fifty-yard range. Make every shot count.’

The ammunition train was hurriedly relieved of their allotted supplies, and sped off, bearing the worst-wounded, to aid whichever beleaguered unit

needed it next.

‘Stand ready.’

‘My lord?’ The voice became more insistent.

The voidships in orbit were beginning to fire. Their targeting systems were perturbed by the boiling warp energy and the vortex in constant motion over the Imperial Palace, and many shots went wide, crashing down into the Anterior Barbican, a few falling as far out as Magnifican.

Red monsters bounded towards them, as numerous as before, as if their efforts to thin them had been for naught.

‘Fire,’ he said coldly.

‘My lord, your duty rotation begins in half an hour. You told me to wake you.’

This time he heard. Bolters boomed. Messinius froze them with a thought, and with another he shut down the hypnomat entirely.

Vitrian Messinius awoke groggily.

‘My lord,’ his servant said. Selwin, he was called. ‘You are returned from your recollections?’

‘I am awake, Selwin, yes,’ Messinius said irritably. His mouth was dry. He wanted to be left alone.

‘Shall I?’ Selwin gestured to the hypnomat.

Messinius nodded and rubbed his face. It felt numb. Selwin flicked a number of toggles on the hypnomat and it powered down, the steady glow of its innards fading to nothing and winking out, taking the immediacy of Messinius’ memories with it.

‘The wall again?’ Selwin asked.

The hypnomat’s primary use was to instil knowledge without active learning on the subject’s part, but it could reawaken memories to be lived again. Full immersion in the hypnomat required cooperation from Messinius’ catalepsean node, and coming out of the half-sleep was never as easy as true waking. Reliving past events dulled his wits. Messinius reminded himself to be guarded. He forgot sometimes that he was not on Sabatine any more. The local saying ‘This is Terra’ encompassed a multitude of sins. Spying was among them.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Personal debriefing.’ He shook his head and unplugged the hypnomat’s input cables from the neural ports set into his arms and neck. ‘Nothing new learned.’

Selwin nodded, then hesitantly said, 'If I may be so bold as to ask, why do it, my lord, if you expect to learn nothing?'

'Because I can always be wrong,' Messinius said. He pointed at the hypnomat. It was a bulky machine set on a trolley, but not too big for an unaltered man to move. 'Take that away. Inform my armourer I will be with him in a few minutes.'

Selwin bowed. 'Already done, my lord.'

Click here to buy *Dawn of Fire: Avenging Son*.

OceanofPDF.com

THE BLACK LIBRARY NEWSLETTER



**Sign up today for regular updates on the
latest Black Library news and releases**

SIGN UP NOW

OceanofPDF.com



**GAMES
WORKSHOP**

**WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT
WARHAMMER
40,000?**

Visit our Games Workshop or Warhammer stores,
or **games-workshop.com** to find out more!

A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION

First published in Great Britain in 2021.

This eBook edition published in 2021 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Represented by: Games Workshop Limited – Irish branch,
Unit 3, Lower Liffey Street, Dublin 1, D01 K199, Ireland.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

Cover illustration by Vladimir Krisetskiy.

Day of Ascension © Copyright Games Workshop Limited 2021. Day of Ascension, GW, Games Workshop, Black Library, The Horus Heresy, The Horus Heresy Eye logo, Space Marine, 40K, Warhammer, Warhammer 40,000, the ‘Aquila’ Double-headed Eagle logo, and all associated logos, illustrations, images, names, creatures, races, vehicles, locations, weapons, characters, and the distinctive likenesses thereof, are either ® or TM, and/or © Games Workshop Limited, variably registered around the world.

All Rights Reserved.

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-80026-626-1

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

See Black Library on the internet at
blacklibrary.com

Find out more about Games Workshop’s world of Warhammer and the Warhammer 40,000 universe at
games-workshop.com

For Alex.

OceanofPDF.com

eBook license

This license is made between:

Games Workshop Limited t/a Black Library, Willow Road, Lenton, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, United Kingdom (“**Black Library**”); and

the purchaser of a Black Library e-book product (“**You/you/Your/your**”) (jointly, “**the parties**”)

These are the terms and conditions that apply when you purchase a Black Library e-book (“**e-book**”). The parties agree that in consideration of the fee paid by you, Black Library grants you a license to use the e-book on the following terms:

- * 1. Black Library grants to you a personal, non-exclusive, non-transferable, royalty-free license to use the e-book in the following ways:
 - o 1.1 to store the e-book on any number of electronic devices and/or storage media (including, by way of example only, personal computers, e-book readers, mobile phones, portable hard drives, USB flash drives, CDs or DVDs) which are personally owned by you;
 - o 1.2 to access the e-book using an appropriate electronic device and/or through any appropriate storage media.
- * 2. For the avoidance of doubt, you are ONLY licensed to use the e-book as described in paragraph 1 above. You may NOT use or store the e-book in any other way. If you do, Black Library shall be entitled to terminate this license.
- * 3. Further to the general restriction at paragraph 2, Black Library shall be entitled to terminate this license in the event that you use or store the e-book (or any part of it) in any way not expressly licensed. This includes (but is by no means limited to) the following circumstances:
 - o 3.1 you provide the e-book to any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;
 - o 3.2 you make the e-book available on bit-torrent sites, or are otherwise complicit in ‘seeding’ or sharing the e-book with any

company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.3 you print and distribute hard copies of the e-book to any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.4 you attempt to reverse engineer, bypass, alter, amend, remove or otherwise make any change to any copy protection technology which may be applied to the e-book.

* 4. By purchasing an e-book, you agree for the purposes of the Consumer Protection (Distance Selling) Regulations 2000 that Black Library may commence the service (of provision of the e-book to you) prior to your ordinary cancellation period coming to an end, and that by purchasing an e-book, your cancellation rights shall end immediately upon receipt of the e-book.

* 5. You acknowledge that all copyright, trademark and other intellectual property rights in the e-book are, shall remain, the sole property of Black Library.

* 6. On termination of this license, howsoever effected, you shall immediately and permanently delete all copies of the e-book from your computers and storage media, and shall destroy all hard copies of the e-book which you have derived from the e-book.

* 7. Black Library shall be entitled to amend these terms and conditions from time to time by written notice to you.

* 8. These terms and conditions shall be governed by English law, and shall be subject only to the jurisdiction of the Courts in England and Wales.

* 9. If any part of this license is illegal, or becomes illegal as a result of any change in the law, then that part shall be deleted, and replaced with wording that is as close to the original meaning as possible without being illegal.

* 10. Any failure by Black Library to exercise its rights under this license for whatever reason shall not be in any way deemed to be a waiver

of its rights, and in particular, Black Library reserves the right at all times to terminate this license in the event that you breach clause 2 or clause 3.

OceanofPDF.com